Discipleship as Erotic Peacemaking: Toward a Feminist Mennonite Theo-ethics of Embodiment and Sexuality

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
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Abstract

While Mennonites are known for their peace stance, Mennonite pacifism and peace theology have tended not to address internal forms of violence within the community of faith and among people who identify as “Mennonite.” Two illustrations of this include the case of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s methodical perpetration of sexual violence against upwards of 100 women, specifically his theological justification of them as acts of “familial love” within the body of Christ, as well as Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA’s discernment processes regarding the morality of same-sex marriage and the membership of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer persons. In both of these examples sexual and gender based forms of violence within Mennonite institutions and understandings of Mennonite ecclesiology and reconciliation processes were overlooked and/or ignored. This thesis addresses such significant failures. It considers the potential of Mennonite peace theology and discipleship ethics for the construction of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality – one that is committed to the well-being of the most vulnerable members of the community of faith (i.e. those with the least access to ecclesial and social power).
To accomplish its purpose, this thesis explores key elements of Mennonite social and sexual ethics (i.e. method, sources, and norms) especially with feminist and womanist interlocutors. This Christian ethics addresses injustices such as homophobia, heterosexism and racism by critical analyses of social relations of power to promote women’s flourishing and the well-being of communities. This thesis concludes with upholding this key claim of a constructive feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality: that discipleship is an opportunity for “erotic peacemaking.” Erotic peacemaking emerges from an embodied view of the incarnation as elaborated by a feminist Mennonite method for Christian ethics, elicits desire for embodied relationships of shared power, and cultivates each person’s positive power as a sexual being for the sake of discipleship in Jesus Christ.
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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMBS</td>
<td>Associated/Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFC</td>
<td>Being a Faithful Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFLS</td>
<td>Council of Faith, Life, and Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMU</td>
<td>Eastern Mennonite University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBS</td>
<td>Goshen Biblical Seminary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMC</td>
<td>Lindale Mennonite Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Mennonite Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCC</td>
<td>Mennonite Central Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCEC</td>
<td>Mennonite Church Eastern Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNAP</td>
<td>Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMC</td>
<td>Virginia Mennonite Conference</td>
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Preface: John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuses and the Need for a Feminist Mennonite Theo-ethics of Embodiment and Sexuality

My commitment to develop a Christian sexual ethics in relation to both Mennonite theology and practices is fueled by the persistence of institutionalized sexism and other forms of harmful social relations within Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) and Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). Institutionalized sexism “aided and abetted sexual harassment”¹ in the case of sexual violence and abuses perpetrated by renowned Mennonite Christian ethicist and theologian John Howard Yoder at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and is also apparent in my experience with professors who have failed to confront these realities that contradict the teachings of peace through nonviolence in the community of disciples.

Given the prominent nature of the institutional and sexualized violence of the Yoder case, I am not the first to reflect critically on it and to name the need for a Christian sexual ethic that does not promote abuses of power, but is nonviolent and committed to the well-being of all in the community of faith, especially the most vulnerable. For example, Stephanie Krehbiel, a feminist ethnographer with Mennonite ties, recently investigated the Yoder case and concluded:

No one in charge of supervising Yoder seemed equipped to confront his behavior with a sexual ethic based on considerations of power and consent […] In attempting to control Yoder, the Mennonite seminarians were hampered by a hegemonic Christian sexual ethic that placed disproportionate responsibility on women for the maintenance of sexual boundaries and understood violations of those boundaries primarily in terms of their relation to a heterosexual marriage contract.²

I join Krehbiel and a community of other scholars in taking up the urgent need for a Mennonite approach to sexual ethics that is life-giving for all.³

The details surrounding Yoder’s abuse of upwards of one hundred women, as well as institutional responses to his abuses, are complex and until recently, largely ignored or dismissed.

³ Informing my work in this project are others who have responded to Yoder’s sexual abuses, including Ruth Kral, Carolyn Holderread Heggen, Barbra Graber, Sara Wenger Shenk, Stephanie Krehbiel, Malinda Berry, Rachel Waltner Goossen, Rachel Halder, and Lisa Schirch.
by mainstream/malestream academia and church members. Historian Rachel Waltner Goosen’s 2015 breakthrough article, “‘Defanging the Beast’: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse” in The Mennonite Quarterly Review offers one of the most detailed accounts of the history of Yoder’s sexual abuses as well as institutional and ecclesial responses (read: failures) to them. Goossen was invited by a discernment group appointed by leaders of MC USA and AMBS, spurred by the advocacy of women such Barbara Graber and Ruth Krall, to bring the full magnitude of Yoder’s abuses and the failure, on the part of persons who knew, to protect Yoder’s victims to light. I rely on and summarize Goossen’s history to ground my work in contributing to a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality.4

Recovering some of the key historical details regarding Yoder’s abuses, Goossen writes: “During the mid-1970s, the renowned Christian ethicist and theologian John Howard Yoder embarked on an experiment in human sexuality, devising his own guidelines and selecting his own subjects, whom he called ‘sisters’.5 The exact number of women who Yoder abused will never be known. However:

... two mental health professionals who worked closely with Yoder from 1992 to 1995 as part of a Mennonite church accountability and discipline process believe that more than 100 women experienced unwanted sexual violations by Yoder. Others knowledgeable about the experiences of Yoder’s victims cite more than fifty as a conservative estimate. Some who were victimized by him, as well as others knowledgeable about his activities, warned educational and church leaders about the dangers he posed. Administrators at Mennonite institutions who knew of Yoder’s sexual misconduct tended to keep decision-making close to the chest, a strategy of secrecy that resulted in information trickling out over a period of time. Yoder’s advances included making suggestive comments, sending sexually explicit correspondence, and surprising women with physical coercion. Since Yoder’s death in 1997, additional women have come forward, confirming evidence from his writings to Marlin Miller [President of AMBS at the time] and other confidantes that Yoder’s activities ranged across a spectrum from sexual harassment in public places to, more rarely, sexual intercourse.6

Goossen’s findings are key at various points in what follows in this thesis as they reveal the need for a healthy theology of power namely, one that accounts for the ways in which power functions

4 For full details, read Goossen’s entire article. A collection and timeline of the articles that outline the conversation and developments on/regarding John Howard Yoder’s abuses is also available on the Mennonite Church USA’s website here: http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/.
5 Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast,’” 7.
6 Ibid., 10-11.
in inter-personal, communal, and systemic relationships, deals with practices and theologies of nonviolence relevant to how power functions in Mennonite institutions, is grounded in a feminist interpretation of how Jesus’ embodied commitments function as a model for his disciples, does not make heterosexual marriage itself a marker of sexual morality; and that addresses institutionalized sexism and violence against women, which Goossen argues were intertwined in the Yoder case.

Stephanie Krehbiel and Ruth Krall also give accounts of Yoder’s abuses using critical feminist liberative lenses. Krehbiel gives a critical account of Yoder’s abuses as it relates to the struggle for LGBTQ justice in the Mennonite church, namely the connection between the struggle for LGBTQ justice and sexualized violence, in a chapter of her dissertation titled, “John Howard Yoder Is Dead: Sexualized Violence and the Haunting of the Mennonite Church.” Of particular significance for my work are the questions Krehbiel raises for sexual ethics from the Yoder case. For example, she writes:

The most famous Mennonite perpetrator, the theologian John Howard Yoder, is perhaps most readily identifiable as a New Left figure whose ideas about sexual liberation were integral to his abusive behavior. The questions his abuse poses to the Mennonite church are ones that animate innumerable sites of political conflict in the U.S.: What are the relationships between sexual freedom, sexual heterogeneity, and sexual ethics? What sexual ethic best attends to issues of power and consent? What makes the violation of a heterosexual marriage covenant a more urgent transgression to address than the violation of another person’s sexual autonomy? When the heterosexual family unit is the foundation of a sexual ethic, whose life becomes less liveable? Finally, what are the consequences of sexualized violence that isn’t seen as violence through dominant systems of meaning?

I foreground these questions in my thesis by exploring key features of Mennonite theology and ethics (e.g. method, sources, and norms) and weighing them in conversation with explicitly feminist theo-ethical approaches to sexual ethics to contribute to the urgently needed feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality that can shape and most importantly be practiced within Mennonite communities.

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7 Ibid., 17-18.
8 Ibid., 25.
9 Ibid., 43.
10 Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 134.
11 Ibid., 138.
Ruth Krall raised awareness of Yoder’s abuses in *The Elephants in God’s Living Room: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder*. Here Krall, a mental health clinician and feminist Mennonite pastoral theologian, treats Yoder’s life as if it were a psycho-social history in order to situate him in terms of his professional position, his published and unpublished work, and the legacy of his sexual misconduct. She also seeks to uncover institutional responses to the allegations of sexual misconduct, but finds that at the time she is writing, 2013, much of this information is unavailable, “permanently sealed to contemporary researchers.” Some, but not all, of this information has since become available. According to Goossen, “although Yoder’s personal papers on this subject – housed at the Mennonite Church USA Archives – remain closed until 2047, other documentation is now accessible.” As part of this history and timeline, Krall also includes her own encounters with Yoder and students affected by him between 1978 and 1981. Krall made the decision to self-publish her work in order to make it easily accessible to all persons – a decision that reveals her motives to tell the truth and join efforts to prevent future abuses.

Goossen, Krehbiel, and Krall bear witness to the history of Yoder’s sexual abuses. Their primary commitment is to the experiences of the women victim-survivors, including the ways in which the abuses these women endured were enabled by patriarchal and sexist institutions. This testimony or truth-telling indicates the urgent need for a sexual ethics that is attentive to the realities of institutional and sexual violence in communities of faith, in this case those of Anabaptist-Mennonites, and the ways in which a community’s theo-ethics can justify this violence. Therefore, an important part of my thesis is engaging the work of theologians who have begun to name and deconstruct the hegemonic thinking in Yoder’s theology – and in the work of scholars who follow in his trajectory often referred to as “Yoderians.” The importance of

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13 Ibid., 173.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., “Defanging the Beast,” 15.
16 I, like Traci West, use the term “victim-survivor” when referring to women who have experienced intimate violence (i.e. violence between intimates and/or acts of sexual violence). To do so is to “rhetorically remind us of the dual status of women who have both victimized by violent assault and have survived it” (Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* [New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999], 5.
doing so cannot be understated. The well-being of Mennonite women and LGBTQ persons, as well as the future of an internally viable Mennonite theology and ethics, are at stake.
Introduction

Mennonite theology is scripture-based, community-oriented, Jesus-centred, and peace-focused. Its peace stance stems from an understanding of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6:20-49) as authoritative for Christian ethical reflection, most notably Matthew 5:10-12 (in relation to suffering and persecution), Matthew 5:33-37 (integrity and the oath), and Matthew 5:38-48 (nonresistance and love of enemies). Yet, as feminist Mennonite theologian Cynthia Hess notes, in the history of the Mennonite church, it’s practice of nonviolence, primarily in the form of refusal of military service, “does not explicitly attend to the reality of internal violence,” which Hess names as “violence that is incorporated into the identity of Christian communities and those who constitute them.” While Hess uses the term “internal violence” with reference to experiences from beyond (i.e. not perpetrated within) the church, in taking up this term I honour her notion of “internal violence” but also elaborate the term to refer to violence and trauma that occurs within the community of faith. I thus add to Hess’ claim that not only has Mennonite pacifism not attended to internalized forms of violence and its effects, but it has elided the violence done among people who identify as “Mennonite.” Feminist Mennonite scholars in history, sociology, theology, and ethics make similar claims. In Mennonite Women in Canada: A History, Marlene Epp writes, “Outside of wartime circumstances […] the gendered meanings of pacifism have only begun to be explored. Feminist analyses of nonresistant/pacifist beliefs have drawn attention to the ways in which notions of peace and nonviolence, espoused as key markers of Mennonites past and present, have overlapped with gendered character traits such as humility, submission, and service,” which have proven dangerous for women in many cases. In Peace Theology and Violence against Women, Gayle Gerber Koontz writes, 

... historically most Mennonite peace theology and ethics has been engaged with questions of and arguments for Christian pacifism in the face of violence that was being justified by others. Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist traditions developed complex systems of theological-ethical thought justifying violence in war ... There is no comparable major Christian tradition which has sought to explicitly justify the use of violence against women. On the surface, such violence has been

18 Ibid., 12.
19 Marlene Epp, Mennonite Women in Canada: A History (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), around footnote 139 and 140.
assumed to be wrong (therefore ethical debate was not needed) while actual practice has frequently been cloaked in silence and self-deception.”

In her doctoral dissertation, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women,” Carol Penner reiterates: “Mennonites have endured great hardship for their unwillingness to hurt other people through military service. Yet Mennonites have tolerated violence directed against vulnerable people in their own communities. Mennonite theologians have been blind to this dichotomy.” And as Lydia Neufeld Harder argues, “The theology of peace, justice, and non-violence that has characterized the Mennonite community has generally not examined the power relationships between women and men.”

Epp, Koontz, Penner, and Harder nuance Hess’ claim that violence within the community of faith (whether internalized or internal to) has not been and is not a central feature of Mennonite pacifism and peace theology.

**Thesis Statement**

In this thesis I move from claims about the failures of Mennonite peace theology with regards to violence against women, to the failures of Mennonite peace theology and ethics with regard to human sexuality. I will make the case that sexual injustice is related to gender violence and inequality because the practices and polity of the church are framed by heterosexual, able-bodied, married, white, economically secure, male perspectives – these perspectives exclude all who do not belong to this circle of significance. Internal violence is evident in Mennonite approaches to sexual ethics and its theological attempts to discern what it means to live as sexual beings and disciples of Christ because Mennonites have yet to develop norms and criteria for its ecclesiology and discipleship that value and are adequate to the experiences of those who exist outside of normative frames of gender, sexuality, and dis/ability. These include those who

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23 Human sexuality encompasses much more than sexual intercourse. Adopting James Nelson’s definition, I define human sexuality as “a sign, a symbol, a means of our call to communication and communion . . . The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out and embrace others both physically and spiritually . . . [Sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion – human and divine” (Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1978], 17-18.)
identify as female, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) persons and those living with disabilities – disciples who struggle to have their full humanity affirmed and to live as faithful moral agents as made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), befriended by Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Denial and exclusion of such persons and groups on the basis of their sexuality and/or gender and/or ability are examples of the internal violence I name and address and, in theological terms, are examples of sin. Therefore, this thesis will investigate if, and if so, how, a normative Mennonite peace-seeking stance can support a grace-filled theological sexual ethics where all persons are created for right relationship with God, self, others and creation in embodied and sexually appropriate ways.

The guiding question that frames my thesis is: can a normative Mennonite peace-seeking stance for right relationship – along with other life-giving and justice-making aspects of Mennonite theology – be recovered and developed for a sexual ethics located in the theology and practices of MC Canada and MC USA and committed to the wellbeing of women and the liberation of all – especially those harmed by dominant arrangements of power? Responding to this question, I will use the traditional sources for doing theological ethics – scripture, tradition, reason and experience – in a dialogical way. I will bring Christian feminist theo-ethicists into conversation with scholars utilizing Mennonite approaches to theology and ethics to explore the gift and pain of sexuality defined theologically and in terms of the use and abuse of power in relation.

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24 Drawing on feminist Mennonite theologian Malinda Berry’s work on sin and grace in her PhD dissertation, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence & Nonconformity,” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, April 2013), I adopt a view of sin as turning away from God and as injustice. This view highlights the functioning of power within the doctrine of creation with regard to original sin and, therefore, signals the need for critical and theological reflection within Christian ethics on the ways in which power continues to function as an inexorable part of human existence (Berry, 25).


Recognizing that there are a variety of different groups who identify as Mennonite, I have chosen to locate my research within the specific contexts of Mennonite Church Canada of which I am a member and Mennonite Church USA. The shared theological convictions of these two conferences are articulated, for example, in General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).
There are several intended audiences for this research, including: 1) scholars who identify Christian ethics as ecclesiology – an approach most commonly put forth and adopted by Mennonite and Mennonite-leaning theologians (e.g. Stanley Hauerwas), 2) clergy and alert lay leaders in MC Canada and MC USA intent on discerning what it means to live ethically as sexual beings, and 3) scholars within the wider field of Christian theology and sexual ethics working toward justice and peace.26 I assume that Mennonite approaches to theological ethics, in terms of both theory and practice, will benefit from engaging Christian feminist norms and use of sources for sexual ethics. I assume that a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and commitment to the experiences of the oppressed,27 particularly women, can help discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in community and in conjunction with scripture. As a Mennonite myself, I assume that there are life-giving elements of Mennonite theology and ethics, and/or the potential for life-giving elements of Mennonite theology and ethics with its emphasis on the community of faith, discipleship, and peacemaking and nonviolence in the ways of Jesus Christ, that can contribute in some positive way to Christian approaches to sexual ethics.

In this thesis, I explore key elements of Mennonite social and sexual ethics in conjunction with feminist and womanist interlocutors. I argue that, in order to overcome its failure to address internal institutional violence and thereby move towards ecclesial and theological integrity, Mennonite sexual theological ethics must include the following criteria: a commitment to the experiences of those who are marginalized and oppressed as the starting point for Christian sexual ethics; an embodied view of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth; a peace ethic that incorporates an understanding of justice especially based in a theory of intersectional power in all relations; critical attention to the role and relationship of sexuality and power within the

26 The language of ethics as a philosophical discipline is, in itself, problematic for Mennonites, whose approach to ethics is more regularly discussed in terms of ecclesiology and discipleship. I use the label “sexual ethics” for simplicity’s sake rather than as a statement about methodological assumptions. Approaching a feminist Mennonite sexual ethics as I do from a liberative Christian social ethics perspective further complicates the discipline of connecting theology and ethics for living the faith. Part of my task in doing an explicitly Mennonite feminist theological ethics is to translate across traditions - bringing voices into conversation with one another in order to become intercultural interlocutors trying to build bridges of faith, hope and love.

27 See Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression” in Rethinking Power, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992): 174 – 195. My understanding and use of the term oppression is informed by Young’s definition of oppression as structural or systemic, that is: “the inhibition of a group through a vast network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules” (Young, 180) and its “five faces” namely: exploitation, marginality, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.
public and private spheres; and a theological anthropology that accounts for sin and affirms human sexuality as loving, erotic relationships modeled on justice (right relationships of shared power). These methodological and theological commitments better enable the Mennonite emphasis on scripture, hermeneutic community, discipleship, and peace to function in life-giving, embodied, and liberating ways for a constructive sexual ethics. I have chosen women-centered theologians and ethicists as interlocutors because of my commitment to beginning with a critical analysis of social relations for a Christian ethics that resists sexism and other abuses of power, names and addresses injustice, and promotes women’s flourishing.  

Methodology

In developing a methodology for this project I have drawn from aspects of feminist Mennonite theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder’s approach in Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority, and womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas’s approach in Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective. Both Harder and Douglas analyze the religious and social systemic patterns and uses of power that have negatively and oppressively shaped the theology, ethics, and experiences of their particular communities. They both identify alternatives and engage in the constructive work of envisioning something less destructive and more just (both in theory and in practice) using critical methods, sources, and norms from feminist and womanist theologies respectively. One of the defining features of feminist and womanist theologies is their insistence on critical self-reflection on one’s social location (i.e., lived experience in complex social relations) as the starting point for theo-ethics in order to be transparent and accountable. An accompanying claim is that all knowledge is mediated through our bodies, including knowledge of God. As Marilyn Legge articulates,

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29 Harder, Obedience, 1.
31 Feminist theo-ethics affirm women’s subjectivity and return to women’s experiences of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion as a starting point for discerning the Spirit’s leading for Christian ethics. Feminist ethics are contextual, appeal to embodied reason – that is: “rationality grounded in sensuousness, integrating feeling/thought” – and are justice-centred. (Carol S. Robb, “Introduction,” Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics, Beverly Wildung Harrison, ed. Carol S. Robb [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985], xix)
32 Harrison, Making the Connections, 13.
“the epistemology of radical embodiment serves as the foundation of feminist ideological suspicion […] thus] women are claiming that only an embodied rationality can adequately mediate divine-human wisdom.” Therefore, embodiment will serve as an epistemological key in my work. Using this key, I now situate myself concretely in relation to this thesis.

I am a young, white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered, highly educated, Canadian, Mennonite, feminist woman married to a supportive spouse. These social markers play a significant role in shaping my current identity and theoethical perspective. As a Mennonite, I appreciate the emphasis that my tradition places on the value of believer’s baptism and its commitment to radical discipleship which takes seriously Jesus’ call to peacemaking, the community as a moral agent, and the importance of scripture as a source of God’s wisdom. The Anabaptist history of persecution by Catholics and Protestants during the 16th century Radical Reformation, as well as the persecution of my Russian Mennonite ancestors for their desire to teach their children in their own schools and to be exempt from military service, ultimately leading them to flee Russia in the 1920’s and come to Canada, are defining narratives in my life that inspire me to live into my faith (e.g., by maintaining a commitment to nonviolence and to the separation of church and state) despite what consequences that might bring. At the same time, there are aspects of my tradition I am bound to critique on the very basis of my tradition’s commitments to love, justice, and peace. While I have been the recipient of much love and support within the Mennonite church and gained valuable insights from Mennonite approaches to theology and ethics, acknowledging the role that my social privilege of being white, able-bodied, married, heterosexual, and cisgender have played in this, I have also experienced ageism and sexism among Mennonites because I am a young woman. While I have been inspired by the narratives of strength and obedience of my pacifist Anabaptist and Mennonite forbearers, I have also come to view these narratives as gendered and increasingly dangerous for women and LGBTQ Mennonites.

34 A feminist commitment to embodiment as an epistemological key reiterates the importance of women’s experiences as the starting point for Christian ethics and a source of women’s moral agency. See Legge, The Grace of Difference, 15. In my work I will expand on the theological basis for such a claim drawing on, for example, Legge’s contribution in, “Sex in Public: The Challenge of HIV/AIDS to Canadian Theologies,” Journal of Constructive Theology: Gender, Religion and Theology in Africa 11, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 47-48.
35 A person is cisgendered if they identify with the gender assigned to them at birth and corresponding to their sex organs. The opposite of cisgender is transgender.
The heteronormative perspective of MC USA and MC Canada on marriage is an example of the internal violence of the Mennonite church that I have witnessed.\textsuperscript{36} I have seen the ways in which MC Canada’s “Being a Faithful Church” process “others” LGBTQ Mennonites by speaking \textit{about} them rather than \textit{with} them in its discernment on the topics of scripture, the church, and sexuality. I have also closely followed recent developments in MC USA on same-sex marriage and church membership and leadership positions for LGBTQ persons. At its annual conference of June 30 – July 5 2015, MC USA reaffirmed the 2001 membership guidelines alongside the \textit{Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective} as the guiding documents for questions regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriage. The 2001 membership guidelines and \textit{Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective} reveal that the “teaching position of Mennonite Church USA” is that homosexual, extramarital and premarital sexuality are sin.\textsuperscript{37} I continue to witness the devastating impact this is having on my LGBTQ Mennonite friends living in the United States, who have been excluded yet again from the church in which they seek to belong.

Each of these experiences have led me to engage the underdeveloped nature of Mennonite peace theology and its ethics, including its inability to recognize the ways in which power can be abused \textit{within} the community of faith and deny the existence and trauma of internal violence amongst Mennonites. I concur that such abuses of power are rooted in hierarchical, binary, social relations that privilege, for example, male over female, middle aged over young adult, able-bodied over those who live with disabilities, and heterosexual over LGBTQ.\textsuperscript{38} I contend that these binaries reveal a rupture between Mennonite theology and witness that is inconsistent with the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on discipleship and peacemaking as intrinsically related to both an inner and outer change as a result of confession of Jesus as Lord.

\textsuperscript{37} Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, “Resolution on the Status of Membership Guidelines” (Kansas City, 2015) available online: http://mennoniteusa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/05/ResolutiononStatusofMembershipGuidelines_Final.pdf
\textsuperscript{38} This claim is supported by my research base in feminist theory and theologies, which includes sources that use intersectional theories of power in social relations to reveal how hierarchical dualism functions to exclude and perpetuate relations of domination and subordination. See for example, Tracey Ore, \textit{The Social Construction of Difference: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality} (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co, 2000) and Letty Russell, \textit{Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology} (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987).
Different women-centred voices who work in communities of faith as feminist, womanist, postcolonial/de-colonizing and/or *mujerista* have introduced me to necessary tools to understand how oppression is produced and works. Transformation of sinful structures requires an intersectional approach that names inter-structured systems of oppression,\(^\text{39}\) including the oppressive elements of my own tradition, and to understand especially internal violence as injustice and, alternatively, peace as justice-seeking.\(^\text{40}\) These theological constructs and values are intertwined. To learn how to apply an intersectional approach and work towards relationships of shared power, I draw on Christian theological voices that develop methods for understanding the Bible as an authoritative source for non-violent and justice-oriented Christian discipleship ethics, including sexual ethics.

I argue in this thesis that by reading scripture and tradition in relation to the experiences of structural violence enacted within the Mennonite tradition, Mennonite approaches to theology and ethics can more faithfully seek ecclesial integrity as peace-seeking and committed to radical discipleship. Two examples of women-centered theologians who have forged this path are Harder on biblical authority and Douglas on sexual ethics. I also rely on Beverly Harrison’s articulation of a feminist liberative Christian social ethics. As Melissa Snarr articulates, Harrison’s liberationist method claims that “by looking at church life one becomes aware of how its institutions, practices, morality, and members are formed by political, social, institutions with racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed assumptions.”\(^\text{41}\) Using social, political, and economic analyses Harrison critiques elements within Christianity, challenging moral agents to

\(^{39}\) Here I identify with Beverly Harrison’s approach to liberative feminist social ethics, which recognizes that institutions are interdependent and oppressions interlocking (e.g. Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 253). This approach differs from the approach commonly associated with/adopted by my own Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and promoted by Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder, which focuses on the narrative of the particular community of disciples in Christ as set apart from “secular” society and the power of its institutional formations. See Tracey Ore, *The Social Construction of Difference*, for her attention to the intersectionality of power and the importance of context and Melissa Snarr’s articulation of the differences between Hauerwas and Harrison’s methods with regard to their social conceptions of the self in *Social Selves and Political Reform: Five Visions in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2007), 71-87.

\(^{40}\) A commitment to peace and an understanding of nonviolence from a feminist perspective must seek the rejection of violence and war. It must also seek equality for women located in a positive understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God as a gendered being – whichever gender a person identifies with (Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminism and Peace,” *The Christian Century*, 100 no. 25 [1983]: 771-776). Adopting a feminist perspective, I claim that peace and justice are intertwined and that nonviolence includes resistance to injustice. Other proponents of this view include, for example, Glen Harold Stassen, ed., *Just-Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York, NY: Good Books, 2014) and Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices.”

\(^{41}\) Snarr, *Social Selves and Political Reform*, 82.
join in resistance to all that maims and thwarts the gospel. Her method is a valuable resource for critically examining the ways in which relationships of power function within the logic of Mennonite approaches to social ethics and to work toward a healthy theology of power.42

Sources

In my research and analysis of Mennonite sexual ethics, I will be attentive to the Wesleyan quadrilateral of four sources for theo-ethical reflection first described by Albert Outler: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.43 While in theory Mennonite approaches to ethics rely most heavily on scripture and do not explicitly name their use of these four sources, in practice all four are used by Mennonites for discerning the ongoing leading of the Holy Spirit.44 The precedent within scripture itself for valuing experience, reason, and tradition as potential sources of divine revelation is additional justification for the use of these sources within this thesis.45 In particular, I will focus on select academic sources as well as polity and statements of the Mennonite ecclesial tradition for the work of rethinking Mennonite sources and methods for theo-ethics and understandings of sexuality and the body.

Norms

All sources of theo-ethical authority require norms to be interpreted and used as guidelines and standards of moral agency. Theological norms answer this moral question: what is to be done to live faithfully and with integrity in, with, and before God and neighbour? The norms I will use in

42 My framework fits within the broader context of theological ethics as a feminist methodology rooted in the genre of feminist social ethics known as liberative rather than liberal. Articulated by Beverly Harrison, this methodology “seeks to address concrete patterns of human suffering, not only to illumine gender injustice but to show [how systems of oppression are interlocking] and shape public discourse” (Harrison, “Forward,” in Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques, Elizabeth Bounds et al. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), viii)


44 An example is the evolution of MC Canada and MC USA’s views on prayer coverings or “veils,” which women in MC Canada and MC USA are no longer required to wear. Over the course of the twentieth century, certain Mennonite women argued that on the basis of their experiences of inequality related to what they were required to wear versus what Mennonite men were required to wear, and the impact this had on them, they should have the freedom to decide for themselves if they wanted to wear the prayer covering or not. In this case, women’s experiences served as sources of moral reasoning that were eventually recognized as authoritative for the church. For more information see Epp, Mennonite Women in Canada.

45 For example, ancient Israel’s experience of liberation from slavery as that which taught the Israelites more about who Yahweh was and how Yahweh wanted them to live (e.g. Exodus; Lev. 11:45, 19:34, 19:36; Num. 15:41).
this thesis include: justice (“rightly ordered relations of mutuality in the total web of our [eco-] social relations,” which includes the viable sharing of power), just-peace (rooted in the biblical understanding of *shalom* as justice), the well-being of women, liberation and reconciliation, just-love (as that which embodies mutuality and nonviolence), and inclusive, egalitarian Christ-centred community.

In doing Christian feminist social ethics several research questions operate for constructing a feminist Mennonite sexual ethics. I will apply the following normative questions to authoritative sources as criteria of adequacy to assess whether or not the norms named in the paragraph above are being met: Who is the assumed moral agent in feminist and Mennonite approaches to social/sexual ethics? What references are made to social structures regarding family, women’s roles, cultural understandings of sexuality, economic constraints, race/ethnic background? How are sexuality, eros, body-soul connection, male, female, marriage, and family understood? Regarding justice and equal sharing of power, whose interests are served with regard to the various approaches to sexual ethics? Whose are not? In other words, what is at stake and for whom? I will also discuss how academic contributions related to sexuality and the body welcome or silence voices of women and LGBTQ people. These questions and concerns further reveal the ways in which this thesis will utilize Christian feminist norms for Mennonite

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47 Informed by Malinda Berry’s argument in, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace.’” Theo-ethical resources detailing just-peace as a theo-ethical practice include, for example, the World Council of Churches Central Committee, *An Ecumenical Call to Just Peacemaking* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publishing, 2011) and Stassen, *Just-Peacemaking*. My understanding of just-peace is also informed by John Paul Lederach’s understanding of peace as centred and rooted in “the quality of face-to-face interactions and the ways in which we structure social, political, economic, and cultural relationships” as those which increase understanding, equality, and respect (*Little Book of Conflict Transformation* [Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003], 20-21).


49 In conjunction with Emilie Townes in “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011): 36-50, I view liberation and reconciliation as essential norms within an ethic that claims to seek peace and justice. Liberation is God’s work of salvation in Jesus, which takes both a spiritual form and a social form when faith and action or “witness” are lived out (41).


theology and ethics in order to discern which aspects of Mennonite theology, polity, and practices can be recouped for a theological sexual ethics.

This thesis relies on the Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on the “hermeneutic community” as an interpretive body of disciples that passes along the tradition and adapts and utilizes particular norms for interpreting sources for theology and ethics. I propose to influence and to help change existing norms that are not life-giving for women and LGBTQ Mennonites within the particular hermeneutic communities of MC Canada and MC USA in reference to key Mennonite church documents on marriage, sexuality, and the body. However, a comprehensive engagement with these sources of Mennonite polity and practice on detailed matters of sexuality and the body is beyond the scope of this research. My primary commitment is to engage Mennonite ecclesiology and ethics for the purpose of working towards a just and peace-oriented sexual ethics that can be understood as both Mennonite and feminist.

Procedure

In Chapter 1, I attend to the sources of a feminist Mennonite sexual ethics. I critically explore the Mennonite emphasis on the authority of scripture and the role of the hermeneutic community for social ethics, particularly within John Howard Yoder’s work, and assess it using the norms outlined in the introduction of the thesis. In conversation with Lydia Neufeld Harder and Malinda Berry, I critique Yoder’s inattention to the way in which power functions in social relationships within the hermeneutic community. In response, I present several key feminist methods and norms for biblical interpretation, including those of Elizabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, Beverly Harrison, Letty Russell, and Phyllis Trible, that reimagine how the authority of scripture and the role of the hermeneutic community can function not only in harmful but also in

52 That is, I am researching the potential criteria and outcomes for disciples - especially those who bear the burdens of dis-ordered power currently – of a framework for a peace-seeking, justice-oriented sexual ethics. My reference to church documents and/or the practices of the Mennonite ecclesial community is for this purpose.
53 My research norms, outlined on page 8, also reflect the norms of the ethic that I am proposing.
liberating ways for sexual ethics. I will pay particular attention to justice as seeking right relation as a norm for discerning the authority of scripture and whose voices are authoritative within the hermeneutic community. In conversation with Berry, who argues that an inattentiveness to power relations in the logic of the Mennonite hermeneutic community has led to its underdeveloped view of peace as that which is unrelated to social justice, I articulate a theology of power that emerges from this conversation on sources and norms to explore and articulate as an integral aspect of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality.

In Chapter 2, I outline the methodological issues of the dialogical method I am constructing for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. Such a method will need to investigate the Mennonite understanding of “ecclesiology as ethics” and how it has been lived in terms of sexuality and embodied relations, and especially its impact on LGBTQ Mennonites. I begin by critically examining the theology of discipleship and ecclesiology central to Mennonite theology, in particular in the work of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. I also analyze these discipleship and ecclesiology frameworks in dialogue with Malinda Berry, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Beverly Harrison, Cynthia Hess, and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite as they each critically analyze intersectional power relations. For my purpose of developing an adequate feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality, this includes investigating the relation of the so-called “public and private spheres” in order to provide evidence of the lived-

56 Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace,’” 128.
57 This phrase is commonly used by Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians such as Harry Huebner and John Howard Yoder, as well as Stanley Hauerwas, to convey that doing Christian ethics means being the church and discerning what it means to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ in the church and the world. See for example Harry Huebner and David Schroeder, Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics? (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Press, 1993), x, John Howard Yoder, The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 77 and Stanley Hauerwas, After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 99. I discuss Huebner, Yoder, and Huebner’s understanding of ecclesiology as ethics in detail in Chapter 2.
58 Though not a Mennonite, Hauerwas’ identifies with many characteristics of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and his work is greatly influenced by John Howard Yoder’s theology and ethics. Like Yoder, he emphasizes the close relationship between ethics, ecclesiology, and theology as given meaning within the community of faith (See Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981]).
59 This is an important feminist claim that refutes liberal society’s separation of the private sphere designated as the world of the apolitical, personal life from the public sphere (i.e., the world of politics). My commitment to a feminist sexual ethics will thus include a commitment to exploring the ways in which personal and sexual pains are linked to the wider dynamics of social systems. See for example, Harrison, Making the Connections, 245 and Susan E. Davies and Eleanor H. Haney, eds. Redefining Sexual Ethics: A Sourcebook of Essays, Stories, and Poems (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), xi.
consequences of ecclesiology as ethics. For example, who benefits and who is burdened by the ecclesial structures and relations of power? Who is excluded and/or marginalized? In particular I aim to see how “being church” is lived out in the moral terms of virtues, values, obligation and moral vision. I do so within the context of four case studies: 1) Matthew 18 and Yoder’s abuses, 2) Eastern Mennonite University (Lauren Shifflett’s allegations of abuse against Luke Hartman, then Vice President of Enrolment), 3) MC USA and LGBTQ justice, and 4) Matthew 18 as “loving dialogue” in MC Canada and MC USA statements and discernment processes regarding human sexuality. The fruit of this discussion will be an approach for a feminist Mennonite sexual ethics that incorporates critically appropriated elements of the understanding of ecclesiology as ethics espoused by Huebner, Yoder, and Hauwerwas using the recognition that issues pertaining to sexuality and the body are connected to wider social dynamics (as articulated by Berry, Harder, Harrison, Hess, and Thistlethwaite).

In Chapter 3, I explore the Mennonite emphasis on discipleship and peacemaking for sexual ethics. A Mennonite feminist theo-ethics will reimagine embodied shalom in the form of sexual, erotic, relationships and in conjunction with an emphasis on the role of Jesus for discipleship ethics. I engage theologians such as James B. Nelson who emphasize the importance of an embodied view of the incarnation for sexual ethics. I then bring contemporary Mennonite theological anthropologies into conversation with other theological anthropologies that pay particular attention to suffering bodies (e.g. women’s bodies, LGBTQ bodies). Here I

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60 Again, “ecclesiology as ethics” is a reference to Mennonite notions of Christian ethics as what it means to live as disciples of Christ – what it means to be the church. I also use “ecclesiology as ethics” to refer to the particular paradigm for this understanding articulated by Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas. I outline the details in Chapter 2.


argue that to embody shalom means connecting praxes of peace theology with sexual ethics via an embodied view of the incarnation. Such a view privileges the experiences of bodies that suffer unjustly, celebrates bodies as sites of divine revelation and mediums for imaging God with self and others, and incorporates justice as a criterion for loving relationships that reflect what it means to be created as sexual beings in the image of God.

Naming the fruits of this thesis in Chapter 4, I present the framework for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality that views discipleship as a vocation of “erotic peacemaking.”

In the conclusion I name and elaborate key theo-ethical implications of the framework I present, including implications for Christian sexual ethics more broadly, and indicate areas for future research stemming from this project.
Chapter 1: Issues in Sources and Norms

In this chapter I attend to several key issues regarding the sources and norms of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. I begin by naming the authority of scripture and the role of the hermeneutic community within Mennonite theology and, in particular, in the work of John Howard Yoder. I then assess these understandings of the authority of scripture and the hermeneutic community using the norms outlined in the introduction of the thesis. In conversation with Lydia Neufeld Harder and Malinda Berry, I critique Yoder’s inattention to the ways in which power functions in social relationships within the hermeneutic community. Responding, I locate myself in the critical and constructive field of feminist biblical interpretation. I present several key feminist methods and norms for biblical interpretation, such as those put forward by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Beverly Harrison, Letty Russell, and Phyllis Trible, to reimagine how the authority of scripture and the role of the hermeneutic community can function not only in harmful but also in liberating ways for sexual ethics. In the process I pay particular attention to justice as a norm for discerning the authority of scripture and whose voices are authoritative within the hermeneutic community. In conversation with Berry, who argues that inattentiveness to power relations in the logic of the Mennonite hermeneutic community has led to its underdeveloped view of peace as that which is unrelated to social justice, I articulate a theory of power in relation and a theology of shared power (i.e. mutuality). This work on power is an essential part of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality and informs my work in each of the subsequent chapters.

64 My research norms, outlined on pages 20-21, also reflect the norms of the ethic that I am proposing.
65 Harder, Obedience, 52 and Berry, “Avoiding Avoidance.”
66 Fiorenza, But She Said; Heyward, Touching Our Strength; Harrison, Making the Connections; Russell, Household of Freedom; and Trible, Texts of Terror.
67 Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace,’” 128.
Authoritative Sources for Mennonite Ethics

Scripture is named as the primary source for theological and ethical discernment in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Unlike Protestant traditions that draw more evenly on scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, Mennonites, as stated by Article 4 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*,

> [a]cknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.  

This confession reflects understandings of scripture articulated in early Anabaptism. Early Anabaptists believed that “[scripture] alone was considered authoritative for doctrine and life, for all worship and activity, for all church regulations and discipline.” According to Menno Simons, “the whole scriptures, both Old and New Testament, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction . . . Everything contrary to Scripture, therefore . . . should be measured by this infallible rule.” Mennonite historian Abraham Toews states, “[i]n matters of conduct, Mennonites have always looked to the Bible.” Their commitment to peace, for example, is understood as the result of confession of Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour as revealed in scripture as a witness of the Divine, which requires obedience or discipleship to Christ. Scripture remains a primary source for Mennonite discipleship ethics.

The notion of the hermeneutic community – the community of faith as an interpretive body – is also significant among Mennonites and reveals a connection between scripture, experience, and reason that is not clearly articulated in the above citations. Harder explains:

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72 Ibid., 15-16.
“central to the way Anabaptist/Mennonites have expressed their approach to scripture interpretation has been an emphasis on the faith community as a hermeneutic community.”

It is within the faith community, a community of people committed to lives of discipleship modeled after the Jesus of scripture, that the revelatory truth of the biblical text is most readily discerned by Mennonites. Harder states:

[In Anabaptism] all members of the covenant community were to be responsible to participate in the process of determining the meaning of the Bible. Not the state, nor specialized theologians, nor hierarchical authorities were to be the final judge of the Bible’s meaning. Rather accountability was to the whole community of faithful followers of Jesus. A process of dialogue and mutual council was to enable a congregation to live out the practical implications of the gospel message. Faith experience (salvation) was thus closely linked to faith knowledge (revelation).

Thus, for Anabaptists, the hermeneutic community represented a shift to understand the present faith experiences of believers as important in the process of hearing the dynamic Word of the Bible. The functioning of the hermeneutic community also reveals a connection between scripture and reason as the community developed and employed certain kinds of interpretive reasoning in its approach to understand scripture via the process of dialogue and mutual council that Harder names. In the Anabaptist-Mennonite journal, *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, Karl Koop further confirms that whether or not all Protestants and Anabaptists would admit it, “interpreting scripture can never mean holding strictly to the principle of sola scriptura.” He states, “Theologians . . . are now recognizing that interpretations of the Christian story are always shaped by religious, social, and cultural contexts, which in turn are shaped by some kind of tradition.”

Even so, a false dichotomy of scripture and experience exists in the work of many theologians working within an Anabaptist-Mennonite framework for ethics. The primacy of scripture, understood as separate from and more valuable than the wisdom of the experiences of the hermeneutic community, is often claimed as normative for ethical discernment. This is

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74 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
particularly true with regard to sexual ethics. In *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*, published by Herald Press (a ministry of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA), Mark Thiessen Nation states: “Given my theological orientation, I do not begin my approach to this subject [i.e., homosexuality] primarily by focusing on the experiences of gays and lesbians nor on my experience or impressions of them. I want my (and as Christians, our) approach to this subject to be Christian, meaning richly biblical and theological.” Instead of recognizing the inherent relationship between scripture and experience (or the Mennonite understanding of the experiences of the hermeneutic community as those that grant scripture authority), Nation disregards experience as that which is not “richly biblical and theological.” For him, scripture and experience are two separate sources, the former a source of divine wisdom for ethics and the latter not.

In *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley also dichotomizes scripture and experience. Swartley relies heavily on the authority of scripture as “fully reliable and trustworthy,” but refers to experience as “an ambiguous source of moral authority and not definitive.” He employs what he calls a “plain reading” of Genesis 1 and 2 (in which God creates humans male and female) and finds that the text “plainly” proves same-sex marriage and intercourse are morally wrong. In this way, he, like Nation, claims scripture over and apart from experience as a source for Christian ethics and, in doing so, assumes that a neutral reading of the biblical text is possible. Because all experience is embodied, in actuality Swartley and Nation prioritize their own experiences as valid sources for moral discernment over those of persons within the community of faith who disagree with them on the topic of same-sex marriage, such as Christians who believe that sexual orientation is not a moral issue. In fact, Swartley largely overlooks the role of the hermeneutic community for discerning the Spirit’s leading for discipleship as practiced in sexual relationships, including how the community arrives at the criteria for discerning ethical behaviour.

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79 Ibid., 126.
80 Ibid., 25.
The limitations of biblical texts on sexuality and the body add to the difficulties in using scripture as a source for sexual ethics. For example, a coherent sexual ethic is not articulated as such in scripture and biblical texts are shaped by pre-scientific and patriarchal understandings of the body and sexual reproduction. Walter Wink notes: “the Hebrew pre-scientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space.”81 As a result, male masturbation and sex between men were considered tantamount to murder, whereas female masturbation and sex between women received far less attention and were not considered nearly as problematic.82 In the cultures of the Hebrew bible, there was an emphasis on fertility and sexuality was situated within patriarchal political and kinship structures. To a large extent the biblical laws regarding marriage and sexuality in Hebrew society are informed by the biblical command to procreate and patriarchal models for sexual relationships.83 The New Testament is equally as confusing with regard to sexuality. As Margaret Farley notes, “There is no systematic code of sexual ethics, but only occasional responses to particular questions in particular situations.”84 In essence, many of the biblical texts about sexuality are culture-bound and are thus unable to offer much direct support for discerning a contemporary sexual ethics for the church today.

Because the biblical legacy is informed by patriarchal culture, but also includes subversive texts that counter these structures, it is important to employ a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion for interpretation. With regard to sexual ethics in particular, Farley writes: “[f]inding in the Hebrew Bible the light we need for contemporary sexual ethics involves . . . a serious exegetical and interpretive task.”85 This is also the case with regards to the New Testament, in which, “moral guidelines for every sphere of human life, including the sexual, are to be gleaned from an overall command to love God and neighbor.”86 “Guidelines,” according to Farley, “can also be drawn from instructions about the moral life that call for a radical re-orientation of each person toward God and a consequent transformation of all human

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82 Ibid.
83 Farley, Just Love, 184.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
relations.” A feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, articulated most notably by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is a critical approach to scriptural interpretation that considers how scripture functions to oppress. It is a suspicion of the “kyriarchal” aspects of scripture and scriptural interpretations (i.e. the interlocking structures of domination, not limited to patriarchy, but also including classism, racism, and heterosexism for example). 

In Mennonite social ethics more broadly, the hermeneutic community receives greater attention. Yoder considers the theo-ethical function of the hermeneutic community in light of the Rule of Paul – namely, Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians about holding a meeting in the power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14). In his interpretation of the text, Yoder highlights the instruction that each person in the community of faith must be given the opportunity to prophesy (1 Cor. 14: 29-31). In modernity, Yoder understands the Rule of Paul to include a commitment to hearing even the adversary. He names two implications that stem from this commitment. The first is the need to act non-violently in order to gain the receptivity of the adversary and to be receptive to the adversary. He cites Gandhi as an example of someone who practiced this approach. The second is developing an awareness of what needs to be done in order to hear the voices of the oppressed by, for example, adopting liberation theology’s “‘epistemological privilege of the oppressed.’” According to Yoder’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14, each member of the community of faith, including the adversary and the oppressed, deserves to be heard by the rest of the community.

An appreciation for the hermeneutic community as a community of individual believers who, together, discern the leading of the Holy Spirit for following in the way of Jesus informs my own view of Christian ethics. I affirm an emphasis on the hermeneutic community and a commitment to strive for the equal participation of all believers in discernment processes regarding faith and life. The challenge I see, however, is how to achieve equal participation when equality does not exist in church and society (e.g. with regard to ability, age, class, ethnicity,
gender, race, and sexuality). Because unequal relationships of power exist even within the community of faith, processes of ecclesial theo-ethical discernment, including the interpretation of scripture by the hermeneutic community, must begin by naming and dismantling relationships of dominating and subordinating power within the community and building relationships of shared ecclesial power. The reason being, discernment processes that do not include this kind of critical analysis of power will inadvertently or intentionally end up being led by believers representative of the status quo, rather than by all believers. This is a concern I have regarding Yoder’s interpretation of the Rule of Paul, which I explain in detail below.

The biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9) conveys a similar understanding of the hermeneutic community as articulated by Yoder. Anabaptist leader Menno Simons writes the following on the subject:

All believers are also priests because they have been sanctified and are called to live as those sanctified by God. They are to sacrifice their own unrighteousness and evil lusts as well as admonish others to do the same. They are not priests who sacrifice bread and wine for the sins of the people or sing masses. Instead, they purify their own bodies daily, are willing to sacrifice themselves and to suffer for the Lord’s truth, pray fervently, and give thanks joyfully.92

Contemporary Mennonites also reference the priesthood of all believers. Among contemporary Mennonites it is frequently a reference to Mennonite identity as a community of equals – each with direct access to God. That said, interpretations of the text also vary. Harold Bender and Marlin Miller claim:

In the 20th century some Mennonites and non-Mennonites have made passing references to “the priesthood of all believers” to characterize some aspect of an Anabaptist (or presumably Anabaptist) view of the church or Christian life. For some, it means that every Christian is a minister (Kauffman/Harder, Yoder). For some, it signifies a process of making decisions in the church (Littell, Yoder). For one, it refers to the believer's access to God without the mediation of a priest and to being a channel of grace for other Christians (Bender). For another, it represents the Radical Reformation's rejection of dividing the church into clergy and laity (Williams).93

Despite its varied meanings, the notion of the priesthood of all believers illustrates how equal participation when discerning the leading of the spirit in conjunction with scripture is an ideal of the hermeneutic community for Mennonite discipleship ethics.

As I mentioned earlier, equal participation of all believers is not, however, a norm that is faithfully practiced among most Mennonites. This is due in large part to inattentiveness to the ways in which power functions in social relationships, including those within the community of faith, which produces a “false egalitarianism.” In this present age, before the full in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, members of the community of faith struggle with treating one another as equals given, for example, their different social locations. White, heterosexual, economically stable, and able-bodied men often end up in leadership positions, particularly at the conference level. Therefore, an uncritical commitment to the experiences of those who constitute the hermeneutic community is a commitment to only certain people’s experiences – those representative of the status quo.

Certainly the experiences of women and LGBTQ persons are regularly ignored in Mennonite processes of ethical discernment. This is perhaps most clearly the case with regard to ecclesial discernment processes on the topics of sexuality and the body, where the very people who have the most at stake are often given the least amount of input. Stephanie Krehbiel notes how the experiences of LGBTQ Mennonites within MC USA are disavowed as potential sources of moral reasoning. She writes:

Overwhelmingly, queer Mennonites found their identities and experiences mapped onto ‘individualism’ in Mennonite speech. Because Mennonites are theologically wedded to the notion of “community” as the vehicle through which God’s will is mediated, charges of individualism bear a particular sting. In a similar vein, I repeatedly heard from anti-gay Mennonites the charge that LGBTQ Mennonites and their supporters placed undue weight on “personal experience” as a barometer for sexual ethics. When, in an interview, I once pointed out to one conservative leader that he had just referred to his own positive experience with heterosexual marriage and family as a justification for his disapproval of queer sex while at the same time claiming that LGBTQ advocates relied too heavily on personal experience, he chuckled and acknowledged my point. At the same time, perhaps because his own marital/sexual/familial experiences were well within dominant norms, he seemed able to unproblematically graft them onto something

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larger—and therefore more credible—than the realm of the individual or the personal.95

Nation’s willingness to dismiss certain people’s experiences in favor of his own for Christian sexual ethics illustrates Krehbiel’s findings. A dichotomy between personal experience and communal experience is also a concern. Communal experience has been and continues to be considered a valuable source for Mennonite theo-ethics. In theory, the experiences of each member of the community of faith are valued. However, in practice, the individual experiences of certain people are viewed with suspicion. Feminist theology’s emphasis on women’s experiences, for example, has been met with suspicion by the majority of male Mennonite theologians and biblical scholars. It is common to hear them make the argument that an emphasis on women’s experiences promotes liberal notions of individualism and therefore is at odds with Mennonite discipleship theology, which is described as post-liberal and focused on the community of disciples (i.e. church), rather than the individual believer.96

Both individual and communal experiences are important and necessary for Christian ethics. When the role of personal experience is ignored as a source of faith and ethics, Harder aptly notes, “experience and biblical text [are allowed to] interact in such a way […] that transformation of the community is cut off and the status quo maintained.”97 When Nation claims not to begin with the experiences of “gays and lesbians” nor his own experience or impressions of them, he nonetheless does begin with his own experience and impressions, albeit uncritically. He also presumes that the embodied experiences of “gays and lesbians” are not valuable sources of God’s presence and leading. In order for the concept of the hermeneutic community to function in liberating ways and promote equal participation of all members, the ways in which power functions in social relationships, including those within the community of faith, must be articulated and analyzed by Mennonite theologians and congregants.

95 Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 12.
96 Karen V. Guth makes note of this argument among male Mennonite scholars in her book Christian Ethics at the Boundary: Feminism and Theologies of Public Life (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 18 & 44.
97 Harder, Obedience, 53.
Feminist Uses of Sources and Norms

Feminist theo-ethicists who critically analyse the authority of scripture “because they continue to see the Bible as crucial for their understanding of the Christian faith” and “seek an interpretation ‘that will affirm women so that they are acknowledged as fully human partners with men, sharing in the image of God’”98 are valuable partners for discerning the sources and norms of a liberative feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. Perspectives within feminist theology and ethics are diverse. Yet, among them there remains a shared commitment to naming and dismantling intersectional structures of oppression such as sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and ableism (often under the umbrella term of “patriarchy” or “kyriarchy”99). With regards to scripture as a source for Christian ethics, this includes a critical analysis of the authority of scripture and the importance of beginning with women’s experiences of struggles for justice as sources for Christian ethics since the Bible can function as both a source of truth and liberation and a source of violence and domination as wisdom that has been mediated through the lived experiences of humans.100 This is particularly true for sexual ethics. The patriarchal nature of biblical texts and interpretations, the distance between the worlds of the text and the world today, and the absence of a coherent sexual ethics, has more often than not made the Bible a stumbling block for an approach to sexual ethics that is sex-positive and justice-oriented.101

Beverly Harrison’s work is particularly instructive for understanding the significance of justice and power in relation for Christian ethics as norms for the use and interpretation of scripture.102 In “Human Sexuality and Mutuality” Harrison addresses the legacy of sex-negativity and fear of the power of sexuality in the Christian tradition, which includes scripture.103 In the

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98 Ibid., 66. Despite the fact that Anabaptist-Mennonite suspicion of theological and ecclesial traditions has, at times, resulted in a reluctance to accept feminist critique and/or incorporate feminist methods of biblical interpretation and approaches to ethics, several Mennonite theologians, for example Malinda Berry, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce, Carol Penner, and J. Denny Weaver engage scholars in feminist ethics, affirming the value of these conversations for theology and ethics within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

99 Fiorenza uses the term “kyriarchy” to reference interlocking structures of domination, not limited to patriarchy, but also including classism, racism, heterosexism, etc.) (But She Said, 8).

100 Fiorenza, But She Said and Trible, Texts of Terror.

101 Farley, Just Love.

102 For another example of a feminist theologian who articulates justice as a key criterion of Christian ethics (Christian sexual ethics in particular), see Heyward, Touching Our Strength.

process, she reveals that tradition and scripture have the potential to be oppressive. As a result, they must be approached with a hermeneutics of suspicion and cannot be accepted uncritically as the objective “Word of God.” Scripture and tradition gain authority for ethics when they insist on reciprocal power in relation (justice), and celebrate sensuality, spontaneity, and creativity by being embodied.\(^\text{104}\) It is thus creativity in the struggle for justice that ought to guide the discernment and interpretation of scripture for ethics.\(^\text{105}\) Elsewhere Harrison clearly defines justice as “rightly ordered relations of mutuality in the total web of our social relations,”\(^\text{106}\) which she locates in the lived example of Jesus. According to Harrison, Jesus’ teachings leads Christians “to insist that the Christian ethic also requires redefining our moral priorities so as to shape our actions in the direction of solidarity with the most dramatically excluded, what Jesus identifies as ‘the poor.’”\(^\text{107}\) In this way, “the religious vision of Jesus, then, requires transvaluation, not merely of rules and obligations but, most importantly, of our social relations.”\(^\text{108}\)

Harrison’s attention to the life and teachings of Jesus as normative for Christian ethics is consistent with the special authority given to the life and teachings of Jesus for discipleship (i.e., Christian ethics) in Mennonite theology. Her description of justice as rightly ordered relations of mutuality affirmed and modelled by the historical person of Jesus offers a guiding principle for a Mennonite-feminist sexual ethics.\(^\text{109}\) This guiding principle promotes a critique of ecclesial social relations that, in practice, privilege some and suppress others. This guiding principle also values the experiences of the oppressed as sources for ethics to be discerned in community and weighed against scripture.

Phyllis Trible offers the story of Jacob wrestling with God as a guide for interpreting scripture from a feminist perspective. She provides convincing evidence that the Bible contains oppressive and violent texts, which make it impossible to be accepted in its entirety as “the Word of God,” thus challenging Christians to re-examine their understanding of scriptural authority.


\(^{105}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{106}\) Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 253.


\(^{108}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{109}\) An understanding of justice is something Malinda Berry notes is lacking within Mennonite theo-ethics more broadly. I get to this shortly.
Her emphasis on the verbal silence of women in scripture further demonstrates the need to re-read and reconstruct scripture and tradition by listening to the voices of women and women’s experiences of oppression as valuable sources for interpretation and ethics.

Letty Russell’s norm for discerning the authority of a biblical text is a text’s ability to witness to “God’s promise for the mending of creation on its way to fulfillment; the liberation of groaning creation.”\textsuperscript{110} This norm and her approach to biblical interpretation resonate with Ruether’s emphasis on God’s affirmation of the full humanity of women and persons seen in the prophetic witness of scripture against injustice. While Russell thinks that norms must come from the experiences of women outside the text and tradition, she also argues that the hermeneutic community can appeal to theological principles of interpretation for discernment since all of life is experiential.\textsuperscript{111} In this way, there is not one external or internal key, but a combination of sources used to discern the authority of scripture and interpretations that “witness to God’s promise for the mending of creation on its way to fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{112} No longer are scripture and experience divided, but authority is understood as a partnership between sources.\textsuperscript{113}

Feminist theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars, like Mennonite theologians, stress that authority comes from the interaction between text and interpretive community. However, unlike Mennonites, feminists demonstrate a primary commitment to the particular voices of women and marginalized persons within the interpretive community for discerning scriptural authority. Lydia Harder clarifies:

Feminists [...] assume that interpreters of the Bible choose to identify with particular communities of dialogue because they are committed to particular agendas. For Christian feminists, this agenda focuses on the full inclusion of women in the social and political interpretive process that yields authoritative interpretations for the church. These women are therefore forming particular communities of conversation that read the Bible in light of their own experience and vision.\textsuperscript{114}

Judith Plaskow is a clear example. She values the role of feminist communities in interpreting scripture and granting authority based on the experiences of communities struggling for

\textsuperscript{110} Russell, \textit{Household of Freedom}, 139.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{114} Harder, \textit{Obedience}, 4.
transformation, liberation, and justice. According to Plaskow, authority does not reside in the text or tradition itself, but in the hermeneutic community, which wrestles with scripture and evaluates it using specific norms and criteria. Additionally, Harrison names the Christian community as the place where moral discernment takes place, particularly “the Christian body of oppressed people birthing the Spirit together.” According to Harrison, authority is a relationship, a connection between text and persons who encounter in the text something life-giving. Fiorenza defines the center of biblical interpretation as the *ekklesia* of women, or women-church, which grants authority based on the experiences of women working for justice in the form of righting patriarchy where men are welcome to join in the hearing and knowing and being faithful. Each of these scholars name the relationship between scripture and experience as interconnected and view the authority of scripture as given and received in the dialogue between text and readers, particularly those who are oppressed and marginalized. They are thus prepared to articulate specific criteria for determining which texts and whose experiences are authoritative.

The primary criterion for feminist theologians in discerning the authority of biblical texts is that the text is experienced as liberative. I now turn to theologians who exercise this criterion and thus whose work well serves this thesis of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Kelly Brown Douglas.

Fiorenza claims that discussions of authority must be guided by a hermeneutics that challenges oppression and empowers Christians to seek justice, freedom, and wellbeing. She is known for establishing a process and method for a feminist political reading that empowers women to learn to read against the grain of the Bible and the faith community’s patriarchal rhetoric. According to Fiorenza, malestream biblical studies is destabilized and critiqued by the *ekklesia* (a public assembly of Christians), which she constructs as a feminist centre and

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117 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 4-5.
public-sphere from which feminist biblical rhetoric can speak. This is where biblical interpretation takes place and whose experiences, namely those of women working for justice, ought to guide the use and interpretation of the Bible. Her criterion for interpreting scripture and considering it authoritative is that the text is liberative by transforming interlocking systems of oppression tested by the question: “Can this text be deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of a global praxis of liberation for all wo/men?”

To determine an answer, Fiorenza’s hermeneutical strategies for biblical interpretation begin with experience and naming one’s social location as an interpreter, move to suspicion and critique of the biblical text and the tradition, and finish with reconstruction of the text by “re-contextualizing the text in a socio-political-religious historical model of reconstruction that aims at making the subordinated and marginalized ‘others’ visible,” and transformative action for change that works “for a different and more just future.”

Fiorenza’s work has its critics. Musa Dube is wary of the term ekklesia for the women’s hermeneutical circle since it evokes the imperialism of the Roman Empire and therefore needs to be opened up more broadly. Others have pointed out that “by relating church so closely to an identity of liberation defined by white American females, feminist theology can be perceived as denying an identity of church and discipleship to those with different experiences and convictions.” Thus, while Fiorenza remains an important contributor to the field of feminist biblical interpretation, it is important to view her work with the same suspicion with which she views the biblical text and the interpretive tradition. Suspicion of power ought to be carried over from suspicion of gender relationships to a suspicion of the hidden agenda within the feminist community.

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121 Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 166.
122 Ibid., 183.
123 Ibid., 186. She articulates her approaches to hermeneutics differently in her different books. In *Wisdom Ways* she articulates seven hermeneutical moves/strategies for biblical interpretation (*Wisdom Ways*, 169). Elsewhere she incorporates aspects of these moves under the title of a “critical emancipatory hermeneutics” (See *Changing Horizons*).
125 Harder, *Obedience*, 85.
126 Ibid., 92.
Critiques notwithstanding, the questions Fiorenza raises and the methods she develops offer critical questions for discerning the use and authority of scripture for a liberative approach to sexual ethics. What if, for example, Mennonite sexual ethics were to weigh biblical passages and interpretations in terms of their ability to be liberative for all, which is measured in relation to the experiences of those who are most oppressed and marginalized? If Mennonites, or anyone for that matter, affirm and accept patriarchal and oppressive texts as authoritative, then they believe in a God who is patriarchal and oppressive. Confronting the oppressive influences in the Bible and the tradition and breaking silence on the topic of sexuality is thus an important part of developing a justice-oriented approach to sexual ethics. In order to do so, and to guide the use of scripture for ethical discernment, safer spaces (recognizing that there is no such thing as an entirely “safe” or value neutral place, only safer spaces) and opportunities must be created for Mennonite women and LGBTQ persons to share their stories and find ways to articulate them in community. A hermeneutics of suspicion, which grants greater transparency and examines the frameworks used for decision making, is an important tool for accomplishing this goal.\textsuperscript{127}

Kwok Pui-Lan recognizes that biblical interpretation is imbued with issues of authority and power. Thus, like Fiorenza, she argues that biblical truth cannot be prepackaged, but is found in the interactions between the text and the particular historical situation of the interpreter. For her, biblical authority is fluid. There is room for dialogical imagination, conversation, listening, talking, and two-way interaction. Biblical interpretation is not limited to the question: “What does the text say to us?” It also asks: “What do we say to the text?”\textsuperscript{128} Thus, like Fiorenza, Kwok argues that the critical principle for biblical interpretation lies not in the Bible itself, but in the community of interpreters.\textsuperscript{129} Within the community of interpreters, she reads the Bible from the experiences of those whose lives have been marginalized and oppressed by use and abuse of the Bible.\textsuperscript{130} For her, the criteria for discerning authority is whether or not the text lessens human suffering and builds a community that resists oppression in the church, the academy, and society.\textsuperscript{131} In order to be a community that resists oppression it must be a place in which biases

\textsuperscript{127} Plaskow, \textit{The Coming of Lilith}, 217-218.
\textsuperscript{128} Kwok Pui-Lan, \textit{Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 11.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 31.
and prejudices are confronted together and individuals come to see how their social location influences how they read scripture. Within community, diversity is an effective tool for accountability since it creates tensions that can lead to dynamic conversations in which claims to truth are relativized, but also listened to. In particular, Kwok emphasizes the importance of listening to voices outside the West when engaging in biblical interpretation to offer greater diversity.\textsuperscript{132}

Kwok’s emphasis on the importance of accountability and transparency between individuals in the hermeneutic community is reminiscent of the emphasis on mutual accountability or “radical subordination” in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and Yoder’s work in particular. However, Kwok incorporates an analysis of relationships of power. Her work thus serves as a reminder and an example of the kind of accountability and transparency required within the Mennonite tradition and hermeneutic community. Instead of allowing certain individuals, for example white, male, heterosexual, leaders, to hold other members of the community accountable to their interpretations of scripture and approaches to ethics, each member of the community must confront their biases and presuppositions in order to prevent misuses of power, to deconstruct structures of oppression, and to understand the ways in which experience and context shape the process of scriptural interpretation. Furthermore, women’s experiences, understood as diverse and not universal,\textsuperscript{133} ought to be valued as important sources of divine wisdom to be weighed and analyzed in community and against scripture using the norms of liberation and justice (meaning rightly ordered relations of mutuality in the total web of our social relations\textsuperscript{134}). All knowledge is mediated, including knowledge of God, through our bodies.\textsuperscript{135} For this reason, the question is not whether particular experiences within the

\textsuperscript{132}Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{133}The understanding of a universal “women’s experience” in feminism has been deconstructed and critiqued by a variety of women who note the diversity in the experiences of women, particularly as a result of each woman’s experience of class, race, sexual orientation, and gender. Postmodern feminists, for example, “reject the traditional assertion about experience within feminism that women form similar identities through the reality of the experiences that they share” (Janice McLaughlin, \textit{Feminist Social and Political Theory: Contemporary Debates and Dialogues} [New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003], 108) arguing that there is no concrete “women’s experience” from which to construct knowledge. Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow recognizes “women’s experience” as both an important and problematic phrase. While it is useful for referring to the “daily, lived substance of women’s lives [...] ‘women’s experience’ is primarily a product of culture rather than some innate female nature” and as a result, it is “not unitary or definable” (\textit{Standing at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective} [New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990], 11).

\textsuperscript{134}Harrison, \textit{Making the Connections}, 253.

\textsuperscript{135}Ibid., 13.
hermeneutic community shape interpretations of scripture, reason and tradition, but whose and how (i.e., with what consequences).

Douglas is another valuable resource for naming norms for discerning the authority of scripture for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexual ethics. Douglas engages Black experiences of White Power (oppression) and their impacts on Black sexuality in order to develop a sexual discourse of resistance, which enables the Black church and Black community to reclaim their sexuality, transform relationships, and challenge existing oppressive structures of White heterosexist and racist culture. According to Douglas, particular social, historical, cultural, and political contexts are significant as they influence the questions asked or not asked with regards to theology. It is experience that guides discourses and use of scripture, tradition, and reason. She also draws on the authority and interpretation of scripture in the Black biblical tradition in order to critique existing notions of Black sexuality and to develop theology as a sexual discourse of resistance. Key scriptural texts and theological images Douglas uses are Jesus as God’s radical embodied revelation, which emphasizes God’s presence with us in our humanity and an understanding of human beings and bodies being created “good” in the image of God from Genesis. In this way, she does not abandon scripture, nor does she grant it undue authority for sexual ethics. Her criterion is that texts and images promote human flourishing by affirming black bodies and are thus justice and freedom oriented.

Douglas’ work demonstrates how scripture can be both sacred, yet insufficient as a source for Christian sexual ethics rooted in an understanding of authority that recognizes the relationship between experience and scripture and values the experiences of the oppressed first and foremost. By her example, she makes it possible to envision a justice-oriented approach to sexuality and sexual ethics within the Mennonite tradition. Her decision to draw on existing scriptural emphases and key images within her tradition serves as an encouragement for Mennonites that there might already be liberative and justice-oriented themes in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that Mennonites can draw on for sexual ethics. How might Mennonite peace theology incorporate a vision of God’s peace as that which is committed to nonviolence in all

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137 Ibid., 111-112.
relationships, including sexual relationships, and thus serve as a positive resource for theological conversations and policy development on the topic of sexuality?

Case Study: Mennonite Church Canada “Being a Faithful Church” Process

A particular example of where and how a hermeneutics of suspicion could have been utilized by Mennonites with regards to sexual ethics is MC Canada’s process of discernment on scripture and sexuality, entitled: “Being a Faithful Church.” The “Being a Faithful Church” (BFC) process was a multi-year (2009-2015) effort to “strengthen our capacity as a church to discern the will of God through the church’s efforts to interpret the Bible for our time,” paying particular attention to matters concerning sexuality.\(^\text{138}\) Part 5 of the process was titled: “Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality.”\(^\text{139}\) While the BFC process acknowledged the need to clarify the authority of scripture in the Mennonite tradition with respect to sexual ethics, which is encouraging, it failed to name the presuppositions of the hermeneutic community and, in particular, the presuppositions of the authors of the material (in this case, three white, male, heterosexual, leaders).\(^\text{140}\) In addition, by focusing primarily on scripture as a source for ethics, it did not acknowledge the ongoing potential of the Spirit to be present in the embodied experiences of the marginalized and oppressed. This is an example of what Lydia Neufeld Harder refers to as a closed hermeneutical circle. A closed hermeneutical circle is created in the Mennonite community when “[e]xperience and biblical text interact in such a way in the interpretive process that transformation of the community is cut off and the status quo maintained.”\(^\text{141}\) Hence the need to begin with a hermeneutics of experience that dispels the search for objective truth, followed by a hermeneutics of suspicion, which assesses whether or not in the mediation of God’s authority (in the Bible and in the church) God is “affirmed as being


\(^{140}\) The authors of the BFC documents are primarily Mennonite Church Canada General Secretary, Robert J. Suderman, Co-chair of the Being a Faithful Church Task Force, Rudy Baergen, and Executive Director of Mennonite Church Canada, Willard Metzger. The Being a Faithful Church Task Force itself is larger and also includes Andrew Reesor-MacDowell, Hilda A. Hildebrandt, and Laura Loewen.

\(^{141}\) Harder, Obedience, 53.
in solidarity with the movement of freedom and liberation, a movement of those committed to the discipleship of equals.”

The BFC process is also an excellent example of a process where there is a need to name and address power as it operates. Douglas’ findings imply that a process such as the BFC process needs to include, at the outset, an analysis of operations of unequal power via attention to the particular social (including ecclesial), historical, cultural, and political contexts that influence the questions asked or not asked within the discernment process on use of scripture and understandings of sexual ethics. An analysis of power now reveals that the questions and concerns of many Mennonite women and LGBTQ persons were frequently overlooked or ignored in favour of the questions and concerns of the heteronormative patriarchal status quo within church. For example, the BFC Task Force discerned that the most pressing topics facing the church, and that should be discussed in the BFC process, included: co-habitation and common law marriage, same-sex committed relationships, extra-marital sex, and pornography. What do love, nonviolence, and justice mean in the context of these conversations? Douglas’ finding that context and power inform the church’s questions for theology and ethics, including its hermeneutics, implies that future discernment processes on sexuality in the Mennonite church must be critical of relationships of dominating power and their potential to influence these conversations.

On Power

Power is the ability to make something happen. In conjunction with psychologists Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams I find that this includes the ability to act and to have an effect. Any act that has an effect contains power. Power, though, can have varying effects. Power need not be controlling, but control is a form of power; “[control] is the ability to make happen what you want to happen.” As I will explain below drawing on the work of Michel

142 Ibid., 71.
144 Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams, Life After Trauma, 2nd ed. (New York: NY: Guilford Press, 2010), 150.
145 Ibid.
Foucault, power is also relational, that is, arising out of particular relationships and shaped by particular discourses of knowledge.\textsuperscript{146} When power is shared in relationships of mutual dependence it empowers people to be “active and full participants in the decisions and environment that affect their lives” and nurtures community.\textsuperscript{147}

In order for the BFC process to be considered liberative for all, especially for LGBTQ Mennonites, who have the most at stake, relationships of power must be understood, discussed, and a process put forward to address them. Power operates uncritically within the hermeneutic community when it is ignored and when no moral vision of right relationships of shared power is constructed. Operating uncritically, relationships of power may embody inequalities consistent with the patriarchal society in which the church exists, and thus enable abuses of power and relationships of dominating “power-over.” I agree with Lawrence Burkholder, who claims it is necessary that Mennonites learn about power for the following reasons: in order that power might be seen as a category of social analysis; to develop an awareness of the unavoidability of power; to warrant against the abuse of power; to discover positive uses of power [i.e. relationships of shared power]; to highlight the dangers of corruption; to examine the criteria by which power may be judged; and to develop a theology of power.\textsuperscript{148} To begin this work, I provide a brief history of Mennonite relationships to power. I then explore Yoder’s emphasis on a theology of the principalities and powers and its implications for Christian ethics. Finally, I draw on insights from feminist theologians to work towards a theory of power in relation and a theology of shared power (i.e. mutuality) for an embodied feminist Mennonite theological ethics. This conversation relates directly to the use of sources and norms for Christian ethics and is foundational for subsequent chapters.

\textsuperscript{146} My understanding of power as relational is informed by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s articulation of power as the effect of particular configurations of relations and discourses, rather than a thing that can be owned (\textit{The History of Sexuality}, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1980]).


*Normative Mennonite Views of Power*

Mennonites speak and write primarily about power in relation to the state, which many define as negative. They do so within an ecclesiological framework that considers how the church is called to live into the kingdom of God as disciples of Jesus. Jesus modelled an alternative to state power (coercive) in the form of God’s power (shared and empowering for life-giving actions). In *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, Benjamin Redekop and Calvin Redekop describe the “Anabaptist/Mennonite relationship to power” as paradoxical.¹⁴⁹ In the Radical Reformation, they note, those who would come to be known as Anabaptists rejected the abuse of power by church leaders in positions of authority, as well as a close relationship between church and state. On the one hand, since then, this movement has continued to represent “a break with the inherited system of intermingled religious and political power.”¹⁵⁰ “Power and authority were not vested in traditional and inherited political power or in the ritually sanctioned offices of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather in the individual will and the community of the faithful.”¹⁵¹ On the other hand, “this radical and innovative stance has the potential to yield its opposite, and even worse, can provide a deceptive, benign cover behind which naked power may operate as though invisible . . . power is renounced yet not in truth forsaken.”¹⁵² There were and continue to be differences with regard to the various Anabaptist and Mennonite relationships to power – in theory and in practice.

In *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008*, Ervin Stutzman reflects on the paradox of an Anabaptist/Mennonite renunciation of power in theory, but not in practice, in the history of Mennonite peace organizations. Stutzman claims that the Anabaptist insistence on the separation of church and state, which is directly related to a suspicion/rejection of “worldly” hierarchical relationships of power, is challenged by the involvements of modern Mennonites in the political sphere. For example, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Washington Office lobbies the U.S.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.
¹⁵¹ Ibid., xi.
¹⁵² Ibid., vii.
government on policies for “a more peaceful and just world.” The commitments and involvements of MCC Peace Office Washington and MCC Canada and MCC US more broadly, which also lobby governments for peace and justice, bring to light another inconsistency, or paradox, in the relationship that Mennonites have with what they consider to be “worldly powers.” Modern Mennonites have, in fact, not remained separate from the world and found ways of witnessing to the world that include actions and relationship building across difference for concrete and material changes for peace for all. Stutzman accredits this to Mennonite assimilation to mainstream culture. Over time he finds that church statements:

... demonstrated an increased willingness to call the state to account for its actions to recommend specific actions to government officials. This is evidenced most clearly by the letters and telegrams to presidents from the denominational assemblies ... symbolic acts of civil disobedience as another mode of protest against government action. In this vein, statements move from a clear deference and respect for government officials toward a stance of confrontation.

Later church texts also revealed a growing awareness of the church’s own complicity with the systemic sins and ills of society. Documents that had previously focused primarily on war and peace shifted when social concerns became tied to concepts of peace and justice. Concerns broadened to include, for example, women’s rights, ecology, sexual discrimination, Native American rights, alternative dispute resolution, and militarism. The contributions of Rosemary Freeney Harding and her husband Vincent Harding to MCC through their work for racial justice is a prime example. In 1961, the Hardings established Mennonite House in Atlanta, “an

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156 Ibid., 261-262.
157 Ibid., 262.
158 Ibid. Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill also document the shift in Mennonite peacemaking from nonresistance or quietism to activism from 1950-1990. According to Driedger and Kraybill the macro forces that influenced this shift include: 1) societal forces (e.g. urbanization, education, mobility, individualization), 2) political forces (e.g. including Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, Nuclear War, Women’s Rights, Central America), 3) denominational forces (e.g. MCC services overseas, missionary experience, Mennonite Voluntary Service), 4) theological forces (e.g. Harold S. Bender’s articulation of the Anabaptist Vision, ecumenical conversations, the influence of liberation theology) (Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994], 135).
interracial social service project tied to the freedom movement, where most of the volunteers were white and the directors were black, and everybody lived together in the same house.” In doing so, they became the first African Americans to lead an MCC initiative. Harding shares:

After we married, we convinced the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) that the church should have a presence in the southern movement. They agreed and gave Vincent and me the task of designing and coordinating that presence in line with MCC’s long-standing tradition of voluntary service work. Vincent had visited Montgomery in 1958, travelling with a group of Black and white Mennonite pastors, and Martin King had invited him to come back and work in the movement. Increasingly, we met others – like Clarence Jordan, from the Koinonia community – who shared our concern and commitment and who were already deeply engaged in this work. As we talked about it between us, our enthusiasm and earnestness grew. So, with the support of the MCC headquarters, we moved to Atlanta to establish a voluntary service unit and join those already organizing for racial justice there.

Harding’s experience reveals the ways in which MCC was beginning to connect their peace mandate to working for racial justice. The language of nonresistance and nonconformity within MCC was beginning to be replaced by language of peace and justice – new terms with secular and biblical meanings to serve as middle axioms in witnessing to the state. That said, related and key concepts including the significance of biblical authority, peace church history, and discipleship remained in peace-related documents over time.

While Stutzman notes the shift from nonresistance to peace and justice in the practices and language of MCC, he fails to demonstrate this shift in his own thinking – revealing an ongoing tension in Mennonite thinking. This is particularly evident in his frequent reference to the powers as structures connected to the world of secular politics alone, not including the

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160 Ibid., 128.
161 The language of “middle axioms” is used and refuted in various ways in Christian social ethics. It commonly refers to a means of translating the ethics of the gospel for particular situations regarding the state/society – detailing how the gospel, through the ecclesia, must confront the law in a particular society (Dennis P. McCann, “A Second Look at Middle Axioms,” The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics, vol. 1 [1981], 76). Mennonites draw on John Howard Yoder’s use of middle axioms in particular. In The Christian Witness to the State (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997) Yoder uses the concept of middle axioms to articulate the ways in which the church should address the actions of the state in the language of the state. He is particularly interested in demonstrating the ways in which the church can influence secular peace movements and work for justice in wider society. Yoder later turned to a formulation of five practices of witness to describe the ways in which the church impacts society by living a political witness to the state (Yoder, Body Politics).
162 Stutzman, From Nonresistance to Justice, 267-268.
realities of the lived church. As a result, and because he does not adopt an understanding of peace and justice as modelled in relationships of shared power, Stutzman fails to recognize the ways in which unequal and dominating relationships of power exist within the church. The clearest indication of this occurs in his conclusion. In his conclusion Stutzman argues that going forward Mennonites must understand their role to be stewards of God’s grace, justice, and peace, which entails renouncing one’s sins, practicing humility, and being obedient. According to Stutzman, liberal and conservative Mennonites resist grace because they do not name grace as the reason why they are engaged in the discipleship work that they are engaged in. He states: “Liberal Christian disciples attempt to change the world by identifying systemic sins, addressing social ills, and engaging in ‘politically correct’ social action. Conservative Christian disciples attempt to do it by personal evangelism, holy living, and engaging in the politics of the Right. Both have limited effect unless empowered by God’s grace.” What does a commitment to grace require? Can the language of grace, in fact, function as a cover for abusive behaviour? Stutzman’s own inattention to operations of power prevents him from recognizing how the language of sin, humility, and obedience can and have functioned in oppressive ways to silence Mennonite women and LGBTQ persons, for example. While the importance of connecting grace, peace and justice is, as Stutzman suggests, real, these concepts must be accompanied by a theory of power in relation and a theology of shared power/mutuality in order to better avoid replicating hierarchies of dominating power-over (including within the church). In this way, Stutzman reveals the ways in which understandings of peace have shifted within MCC (i.e. in practice) to include attention to justice and an understanding of the systemic nature of violence, as demonstrated by his research, but not yet in Mennonite contributions to peace theology and ethics, as demonstrated by his own theo-ethical conclusions.

In sum, Redekop, Redekop, and Stutzman highlight the contentious and complex nature of Mennonite relationships with and understandings of power in its tradition and, in particular,

163 See Stutzman page 269. For more on the shift from nonresistance and nonviolence to peace and justice, see pp 184-209. For example, Stutzman writes: “Because the word justice was so closely linked with a political agenda (seeking justice a part from peace) Mennonites were faced with a dilemma” (185). Many Mennonites tried to use the word while drawing on its biblical connotations related to righteousness and Jesus’ example of justice as nonviolent. A summary statement from the Committee for Peace and Social Concerns invited the church to make social judgements through consideration of the values of love, justice, and peace (186).
164 Ibid., 290.
165 Ibid., 291-292.
166 Ibid.
the history of its peace organizations. Their findings reveal differing, and at times conflicting, understandings: some Anabaptists and Mennonites have viewed power as entirely problematic and others have differentiated between God’s good power and the world’s corrupt power. Within Mennonite peace organizations a positive understanding of power (i.e. God’s power) is witnessed in the shift from nonviolence and nonresistance (i.e. powerlessness as the ideal) to justice-making. This shift, however, has frequently lacked sufficient attention to the relationship between peace, justice, and power, including the theological foundation for a theo-ethics of justice as relationships of mutuality and shared power rooted in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. To examine how theologies and ethics have social/embodied consequences, I turn now to John Howard Yoder.

John Howard Yoder’s Theology of the Principalities and Powers and its Critiques

If power is discussed in normative and formal contributions to Anabaptist Mennonite peace theology and ethics, it is most often done in relation to the biblical understanding of the Principalities and the Powers. This is certainly the case for John Howard Yoder. Yoder draws on the Pauline language of the “Principalities and Powers” in order to understand the structured power dynamics of our society. In Pauline thinking, the powers were created good, became fallen along with humanity and all creation, and are redeemed in Christ. The primary task of the church is to be in itself, “the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ to the powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated.”

In, Principalities and Powers: Revising John Howard Yoder’s Sociological Theology, Jamie Pitts highlights Hendrik Berkhof’s influence on Yoder’s thinking. According to Pitts, Yoder’s views on the powers are informed by Berkhof’s work in Christ and the Powers. Yoder views the powers as “social structures that fell into sin but are now subject to the redeeming lordship of the risen Christ.” Here Christ is the key to understanding how the church ought to live in relation to the powers (its ethics). Pitts writes:

[For Yoder,] Christ is at the centre of the theology of the principalities and powers, as first born of creation, suffering servant, and risen lord. It is through Christ that anything is known of the ‘original’ shape of the powers, and therefore

167 Yoder, Politics of Jesus, 153.
it is through Christ that a clear understanding is gained of their distorted, fallen shape and of their future state of redemption. By attending closely to Christ’s own interactions with the powers, Christians have a clue as to how they might participate in their ongoing redemption . . .

In the context of Yoder’s work, power is the capacity to make things happen, not by violence, but by Christ’s non-violent action. Visible structures are the manifestation of the powers, in the Pauline sense.

Yoder’s portrayal of the powers is not particularly spiritual and this is something he has received criticism for. Harder explains:

Yoder does not focus primarily on the liberation or transformation of the individual person or deal directly with the inner psychological or spiritual factors that have created a loss of autonomy or sense of powerlessness in a person. Instead, he focuses on helping Christians understand external structures and institutions so that they will not be seduced by them. His analysis concentrates on identifying a particular sociopolitical pattern that he names the “Constantinianization” of the church in which a fusion happens between the authority of the church and the power of structures of governance. These create a “framework of normalcy” in which particular power relationships are evaluated on the basis of reason, the orders of nature, common sense, or generalizations arising out of observations of social processes, instead of by the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. He insists that when these secondary authorities are fused with the authority of divine providence, the church is not able to see the radical challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pitts’ response is that a revision of Yoder’s theology of creation, which describes his understanding of the powers, will need to attend to the larger spiritual reality in which the powers exist – namely, the ways in which social structures exist in relation to God and persons (i.e., individuals not groups, communities and institutions).

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169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., 5.
171 Wink also articulates a view of the powers as both the outer visible dimension of social institutions and their inner invisible spiritual dimension (Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984], 5.)
172 Pitts, Principalities and Powers, 13-14.
174 Pitts, Principalities and Powers, 17.
Not unrelated, feminist Mennonite scholars working out of their own experiences of misuses/abuses of power heavily criticise Yoder’s view of the powers for its inattention to the ways in which power functions relationally within the church and does not embody a theology of shared power and mutuality. They claim that not only is it important to be suspicious of relationships of power related to external structures and institutions, it is also important to be suspicious of relationships of power operating internally in the community of disciples and interpersonally. Furthermore, it is important to note the ways in which the personal/individual and the political/communal are related. The clearest example of the various consequences is in response to Yoder’s emphasis on the Pauline concept of revolutionary subordination.\textsuperscript{175}

Feminist critiques of Yoder’s use of revolutionary subordination are numerous. There is also some disagreement among them. Harder summarizes Yoder’s articulation of this theological concept. She writes:

[Yoder views] "revolutionary subordination" as demonstrated in Jesus' own life, in the early church's attitude to the state, and in the household codes [as that which] characterizes the biblical response to domineering power. This subordination is characterized by servanthood, a radical giving up of the need to control the direction in which society is moving. For those in superordinate positions, this implies a giving up of all domineering uses of their status. For those in subordinate positions, this implies an acceptance of life within a given status without resentment. Following the way of the cross means accepting the cost of social nonconformity, living the life of servanthood, self-giving, and even "self-abasement" in order to demonstrate the reality of the confession that Christ is Lord. Thus Christians can participate "in the character of God's victorious patience with the rebellious powers of his creation."\textsuperscript{176}

In \textit{Bread not Stone}, Fiorenza claims that Yoder’s reading of revolutionary subordination “defends the New Testament pattern of patriarchal submission because it motivates Christian slaves and women to accept ‘things as they are.’”\textsuperscript{177} For the same reasons, Rosetta Ross finds Yoder’s interpretation of the \textit{Haustafeln} incompatible with womanism.\textsuperscript{178} She writes: “Yoder interprets the \textit{Haustafeln} as calling for acceptance of subordination – which, from the perspective

\textsuperscript{175} Guth, \textit{Christian Ethics at the Boundary}, 123.
\textsuperscript{176}Harder, “Power and Authority,” 88.
\textsuperscript{177}Fiorenza, \textit{Bread not Stone}, 83.
\textsuperscript{178} The term “womanist” was introduced by Alice Walker in her book, \textit{In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1983) and is claimed by black women who seek to expand feminism beyond its concern for the problems of white middle class women to the wellbeing of all of humanity.
of womanism, offers no improvement in temporal quality of life.” Yet, according to Karen Guth, Fiorenza and Ross “mistake Yoder’s argument that the church ‘accepts living under an unjust social order’ for an argument that Christians need not be concerned with injustice.” Guth claims:

This statement says less about Yoder’s attitudes toward gender equality and more about the means available to faithful Christians to subvert that injustice. Put differently, Yoder’s interpretation does not betray complacency about gender injustice, but reveals his understanding of the most obedient means of challenging it. He makes clear here, as he does with respect to other social injustices, that it is not that the church ‘ceases to be concerned for the relative improvement of the society under which it lives, improvements which certainly must go in the direction of a broader franchise, the elimination of discriminatory legislation, and everything else that causes men to suffer,’ but that the church cannot pursue these improvements in ways that deny its confession that Christ is Lord.”

Guth believes there is no evidence to suggest that Yoder intends to promote dominating relationships of power in his interpretation of Paul.

However, Fiorenza and Ross raise important questions about the gap between intention and reception of Yoder’s work and any harmful consequences. They suggest that an analysis of relations of power along with an incorporation of the experiences of racialized, sexualized, and gendered others are needed in order for an interpretation of the Haustafeln to even be considered as a potentially life-giving model for Christian ethics. For this reason, reception or lived consequences of an interpretation, rather than intention, is more authoritative for theo-ethical discernment.

I agree with Mary Hobgood who says: “I am not concerned with what dominants intend, for many people privileged to greater and lesser degrees by class, race, and sex/gender have only good intentions and wish to harm no one. Rather, I am concerned with what privileged groups effect through their ownership, control, and reproduction of the major institutions in the society.”

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180 Guth, *Christian Ethics at the Boundary*, 125.
181 Yoder, *For the Nations*, 18.
182 Guth, *Christian Ethics at the Boundary*, 125.
use given its negative history and ongoing negative potential for those outside dominant entitled social power. As Harder aptly cautions, “the ethic of servanthood [or subordination] could easily be internalized to imply passivity and submissiveness by those who were used to being dominated and feeling powerless . . . Interpretations of particular biblical passages by the powerful in the community in the community [affirm] this internalization.”

Carol Penner demonstrates the risks of a theology of submission/servanthood and an emphasis on suffering for women with regard to sexual violence and abuse. She writes:

Yoder provides an elaborate explanation of why subordination is different than obedience. His work on the household codes is done in the context of a scholarly debate which viewed the _Haustafeln_ as essentially conservative, and a pulling back from the radical ethics of Jesus. Yoder sees the household codes as profoundly liberative.

_Yet_ in practical terms Yoder’s framework for the household makes no difference to the abused woman for both obedience and subordination require her to stay in an abusive situation. Yoder's theology would assure the woman however, that by accepting her suffering she is being a moral agent and can thus have a meaningful witness and ministry. Yoder claims that God will help the subordinate person to live without resentment.

. . . His theology would allow women to make a stand for themselves and claim their right to justice, but they must accept the punishment which this claim might bring. This should not be disheartening, he claims, because that is the route that Jesus took. The implication is that abused women should not concern themselves with the outcome of their stand for justice, rather they should be willing to suffer any loss for the sake of obedience.

Penner thus affirms Yoder’s _intention_ to support a reversal of the social status quo, but reveals significant flaws in his articulation of a theology of “radical subordination.” Without attending to the experiences and consequences for those who are socially subordinated – in this case women – by not incorporating a critical analysis of power which is operative in all social relations, “radical subordination” is not radical at all.

Penner’s critique also applies to Yoder’s treatment of the role of suffering in Christian discipleship ethics. Yoder does not condone all suffering as redemptive. Instead he claims that

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184 Harder, *Obedience*, 52. In, “Singing a Subversive Song of Hope,” _The Conrad Grebel Review_, vol. 19, no. 3 (Fall, 2001): 13-32 Harder offers an alternative vision of servanthood as solidarity and friendship. In this vision, Harder promotes service as that which is freely given and freely received between equals and thus embodies mutuality (20).

suffering is redemptive and therefore a cross-like form of following in the way of Jesus if it is freely chosen rather than involuntary.\(^{186}\) This is his key criterion. Yet he fails to examine how suffering happens because of the roles and rules governing particular relations that are organized in patriarchal, white supremacist and classed systems to keep some dominant and others subordinate. Therefore, “voluntary” becomes a code word for power and to resist “voluntary suffering” is to reap punishment. In other words, experiences of “involuntary suffering” or “unjust suffering” are often interpreted as “voluntary” and therefore “just” and function to provide theological justification for abuse. As Penner asserts,

> Yoder never explicitly says whether patriarchy is one of the social structures ordained by God to which the Christian should be subordinate. However, patriarchal authority is a system which [is pronounced/confessed and] has often been seen as God-ordained . . . Undoubtedly many Mennonite women have endured abuse because they submitted themselves to what they believed was the God-given authority of male members . . . \(^{187}\)

In this way, relationships of unequal power operating within the community of faith impact the community’s ethics, complicate Yoder’s understanding of voluntarism, and signal the need for character formation and moral action guided by the biblical values of love, justice, and peace to be held together for Christian ethics.

Like Penner, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite also critiques Mennonite peace theology with a commitment to ending violence against women and constructing a nonviolent peace theo-ethic. Thistlethwaite demonstrates the ways in which Mennonite peace theology fails to systematically address the nature of power, which renders it and its adherents vulnerable to “gross violations and power inequalities.”\(^{188}\) In particular, she claims a high incidence of violence against women in Mennonite and Brethren communities indicates that violence against women is an issue for Mennonites. These communities also have a history of difficulties and failures in confronting this violence against women when it occurs. Thistlethwaite cites the Yoder case in particular as an example. I agree with Thistlethwaite, who goes on to argue that these difficulties extend to and

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are perpetuated by inadequacies in Mennonite peace theology. At a conference on peace theology and violence against women in the 90’s Mennonite women scholars identified the following key problem areas in peace theology: a willingness to sacrifice the sanctity of the individual for the good of the community, an ethic of marriage rather than an ethic of sexuality, counting certain sins while excusing others, and a neglect of the theological issue of power and the need for a “liberation pacifism” that mandates social and individual transformation to prevent violence and violation against women.189

As a major contributor to peace theology and ethics, Yoder’s life and work must be scrutinized for the ways in which it was/is part of the problem and has led to an entire generation of pacifist scholars who overlook intimate and systemic forms of sexualized and gendered violence (frequently relegated to the private sphere), both within and outside of the church, and the relationship between these forms of violence and other forms of violence. Yoder’s view of the powers, which does not attend to social power as that which encompasses ecclesial power and relationships within the ecclesia, impacts additional aspects of his theo-ethics. If power is understood primarily through the theology of the principalities and powers, then power is largely understood as negative (given the current fallen/partially redeemed state of the powers) and while it may infiltrate the community of faith, it is always understood as coming from “the world” or representing the broken, destructive, power of the state. What of destructive relationships of ecclesial power as that which is fostered within the community of faith? By its very theology and ethics? In light of Yoder’s presuppositions, peacemaking means witnessing to the fallen powers of the world. The need for peacemaking within the church, to its own theology, is not addressed, nor is a positive theology of power articulated. Without an articulation of the kinds of relationships of power to which disciples are called, powerlessness functions as the ideal. This is particularly dangerous since all relationships are informed by power. There is no neutrality.

Malinda Berry connects the inattentiveness to power relations in the logic of the Mennonite hermeneutic community to its underdeveloped view of peace as that which is unrelated to social justice. She draws on the work of Theron F. Schlabach and Reinhold Neibuhr

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to help explain how it is that peace and justice are separate in Mennonite theo-ethics. She affirms Schlabach’s argument that the modern missionary movement, which Mennonites were part of, became preoccupied with conveying what they perceived to be the Gospel message of salvation from sin through blood atonement.\textsuperscript{190} This theo-ethical turn was a turn away from nonviolence and did not effectively communicate Jesus’ full vision of human well-being as \textit{shalom}.\textsuperscript{191} An interest in moral purity and personal salvation combined with a disinterest in justice caused Mennonite biblical nonresistance to “[fail] to recognize the power dynamics at work within its faith communities.”\textsuperscript{192} Drawing on Niebuhr, Berry cautions that failure to recognize power as it operates within relationships in the community of faith is a moral failure and claims that shared power/mutuality is a necessary criterion for just and loving human relationships.\textsuperscript{193} According to Berry, Mennonite scholars who were and/or continue to be influenced by Yoder’s school of thought have dismissed this caution and this claim. It is time, she argues, “to shift the paradigm and reconsider Niebuhr’s insights because our [Mennonite] ethics cannot simply or solely rest on the shoulders of the Lamb; our institutional infrastructure makes this impossible. Alongside a theology of peace, we must have a theology of power.”\textsuperscript{194}

Berry’s identification of the underdeveloped nature of Mennonite peace theology as an inattentiveness to justice, which includes an inattentiveness to and imbalance of power, as well as feminist critiques of revolutionary subordination, indicates the need for a theory of power in relation and a theology of shared power for an embodied feminist Mennonite theological ethics and the importance of justice as a norm. Making these adjustments will decrease the gap between the peace practices of MCC and current articulations of Mennonite peace theology and provide a theological grounding for peace and justice work.

\textsuperscript{190} Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace,’” 127-128.  
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 128.  
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
A Feminist Critical Theory and Theology of Power

A feminist approach to Christian ethics asks questions about power – that is, about domination and subordination – even before it asks questions about good and evil, or about the character of the Christian community. Feminist ethicists assert that ethics do not emerge in a vacuum, but are discerned and practiced in systems, structures, and interpersonal relations of power that are already and always operating. Therefore, an adequate social ethic “must incorporate analyses of these power realities and their ongoing dynamics [and] an adequate theo-ethical analysis must convey this sort of concrete sense of existing power dynamics that work to prevent the realization of just relationships and practices.”195

As my final tasks in this chapter, I construe a feminist theory of power that recognizes power as relational and a theology of shared power rooted in a biblical understanding of God’s power as power-with humans and creation, as well as the power to resist and to subvert structures and relationships of domination (the principalities and powers). In other words, I draw on feminist critical social theory and apply the norms of peace, love, and justice to inform a theology of power that is integral to a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality.

Michel Foucault’s work on power informs a feminist theory of power as relational. Foucault explores the ways in which dynamics of power are relational. He claims that power itself is neutral/descriptive - the effect of relations and discourses and therefore comes from everywhere.196 Accordingly, there is no such thing as neutrality or an outside to power – “no innocent class of the purely oppressed”197 – since knowledge itself is a product of discourse, which relates to power.198 This understanding of power resonates widely with those concerned with unequal and oppressive relationships of power, such as feminists. A theory of power as relational reflects the experiences of individuals who experience oppression by giving an account of the ways in which knowledge of bodies is a product of relationships of power. Discourses of

195 Harrison, Making the Connections, 177 (emphasis mine).
198 Ibid., 118-119.
power are used within oppressive systems to control particular people’s bodies and, in doing so, their views of themselves. A relational view of power highlights the ways in which oppressive systems operate. It is thus an integral part of any attempt to understand and subvert violent and dominating relationships of power. That said, feminists also criticize aspects of Foucault’s work. Most notably, feminists claim that Foucault’s theory of power fails to “specify the role of male sexuality in the overall exploitation and social position of women.”\textsuperscript{199} A feminist theory of power in relation recognizes that “power is enhanced when shared, reciprocal and constrained by limits that respect the interrelationship that it imposes.”\textsuperscript{200}

A feminist theory of power for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality will also be intersectional. Intersectionality recognizes that relationships and power dynamics between social locations and processes (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, sexism) are linked and can change over time and differ by geographic setting. Professor of Law Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality as “a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color,” but recognized its potential more broadly “as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identities and the ongoing necessity of group politics.”\textsuperscript{201}

Various models are used to describe “the relationship between multiple interacting aspects of power and difference” in the theory of intersectionality.\textsuperscript{202} The two I find most helpful are Patricia Hill Collins’ “matrix of domination” and Rita Kaur Dhamoon’s model of intersectional analysis as a “matrix of meaning-making.” Both Collins and Dhamoon use the model of a matrix as a way to envision intersecting oppressions in a particular social historical context. Collins calls this a matrix of domination. The language of domination reflects her claim that “[a]ll contexts of domination incorporate some combination of intersecting oppressions, and considerable variability exists from one matrix of domination to the next as to how oppression and activism will be organized.”\textsuperscript{203} According to Collins, each matrix of domination is made up

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 121-122.
\textsuperscript{200} Harrison, \textit{Making the Connections}, 175.
of four interrelated domains of power each serving a particular purpose. These domains are: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. She explains further:

[t]he structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues . . . each domain of power illustrates how intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are organized in unique ways.204

Dhamoon nuances Collins’ model by highlighting the productive forces of power (i.e. processes of differentiation) in addition to domination (i.e. systems of domination).205 Dhamoon views intersectionality as a matrix of meaning-making that “foregrounds an expanded Foucauldian view of power so as to capture the ways in which processes of differentiation and systems of domination interrelate. The focus of analysis is thus not ‘just’ domination but the very interactive processes and structures in which meanings of privilege and penalty are produced, reproduced, and resisted in contingent and relational ways.”206 Collins’ and Dhamoon’s models both function as tools for understanding how intersectional relations of dominating power operate, their effects, and possibilities for transforming relationships of dominating power into relationships of shared power. Significantly, they also acknowledge each person’s complicity in systems of domination and therefore their vulnerability. Individuals must be constantly decentering themselves when confronting unequal relations of power in order to acknowledge their own complicity in these relationships and in order to avoid constructing alternative hierarchies of dominating power. For these reasons, a feminist and peace-focused sexual ethic must begin with a theory of power in relation that is intersectional and that uses the model of the matrix to understand how intersecting oppressions operate within particular social locations – such as Mennonite communities of faith.

A feminist theology of shared power builds on a feminist Foucauldian theory of power as relational and a theory of power as intersectional as it asks and answers the question: what relationships of power are disciples of Jesus called to? Note within an application of a feminist Foucauldian theory of power for discipleship ethics it is impossible for there to be an outside to power. Neutrality or a singular identity of being “powerless” is not an option for discipleship. Instead, and responding to the question about Christian moral agency, a feminist theology of power claims that disciples are called to embody reciprocal and mutual relations, which “enable

204 Ibid., 276.
205 Dhamoon, 238.
206 Ibid., 238-239.
genuinely creative power to emerge.”207 Agency and owning one’s power through human action (e.g., practices of discipleship) in ways that embody relationships of mutuality is, according to this claim, part of the task of Christian ethics.208 In other words, a feminist theological view of power understands shared power to be the divine shape of good power. From this perspective, systems of oppression such as classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism are founded upon injustice – a lack of right relation – which thwarts the gift and Spirit of life. Right relationships of shared power, on the other hand, are those characterized by giving and receiving, teaching and learning, speaking and listening.209

To discern how power operates within community, I also affirm Elizabeth Bounds’ guiding questions for a vision of emancipatory Christian community that is, a community that embodies relationships of shared power: “Does the suggested vision of community recognize issues of power, domination, and difference? Or does it assume that immediacy of relationship requires homogeneity? What are the criteria for inclusion and exclusion within the community?”210 These questions help reveal hegemonic, systemic, and interpersonal relations of power at work in the ecclesia. They are thus important questions for a theo-ethics that seeks to be nonviolent and rooted in the life of the community of faith.211

A critical theology of power indicates the particular relations of power that the Divine models and calls believers to embody. These are relationships of shared power/mutuality, which demonstrate love, justice, and peace in regard to oneself, God, and all of creation. As Harrison writes:

Like Jesus, we are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, and passes on the

207 Ibid., 2.
208 Ibid., 5, 9. This view of power is informed by Foucault’s theory of power as relational and his view of the body as a site of power. Feminists, extend Foucault’s work to include an exploration of relationships of power as they relate to gender. See for example, Farley, Just Love.
209 Harrison, Making the Connections, 175.
211 Mapping social power individually or collectively by taking a social power inventory of a particular social context is another way of assessing how power operates within communities for the purpose of doing Christian ethics. Elaine Enns and Ched Myers describe this approach in, Ambassadors of Reconciliation: Volume II Diverse Christian Practices of Restorative Justice and Peacemaking (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 34-36. According to Enns and Myers, the goal of mapping social power “is to determine how in a given context it is unequally distributed, in order to begin figuring out how every person and group in that context might have sufficient capacity to be appropriately self-determining” (34).
gift of life… We are called to confront power that thwarts the power of human personal and communal becoming – that which twists relationship. Jesus’ sacrifice was for the cause of radical love – doing justice; righting relationship.212

Power is enhanced “when shared, reciprocal, and constructed by the limits that respectful interrelationship imposes.”213

In her reflections on biblical understandings of power in the Gospel according to Mark, Lydia Harder notes that the power of the resurrection is not dependent on status or coercion and the power of God embodied in human authority is healing, creative, and subversive.214 It is the role of the believing community to name and challenge uses of power to dominate or control.215 Feminist-Mennonite theologians Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce reiterate: Power is an important quality of the divine – expressed as power for/to, with, and within the marginalized to renew their strength.216 Additionally, Harder warns:

A minority status does not mean weakness. A minority status, whether Mennonite or feminist, does not protect me from these hard choices… in the use of power. The temptation to deny power and authority that comes with education, economic stability, denominational identity, race or gender is there within both the Mennonite and feminist communities. The gospel would challenge the community to expose my use of political and social power to dominate or control.217

According to Harder, there is a necessary tension that must remain between vulnerability and obedience when it comes to the biblical text as a source for Christian theo-ethics.218 She writes, “Neither a suspicion that rejects these texts completely nor an easy obedience that fails to see the freedom of living a new life in Christ does justice to these texts in which the human and divine are so thoroughly intertwined.”219

In sum, a critical, intersectional theory of power and a theology of shared power must be articulated and applied to social relations, including ecclesial relations. Power exists in all

212 Harrison, Making the Connections, 19.
213 Ibid., 175.
214 Harder, Obedience, 130-133.
215 Ibid., 139.
217 Harder, Obedience, 139.
218 Ibid., 148.
219 Ibid., 149.
relationships for good and for ill. Therefore, God calls believers to be critical of operations of hierarchical, kyriarchal, dominating power as necessary to work toward right-relationships where power is duly shared. By critically analyzing intersectional relationships of power and envisioning God’s love as rightly ordered relationships of shared power, Christian ethics is well positioned to reduce personal, ecclesial, and social systemic forms of violence and, in doing so, live more fully into the Kingdom of God here and now. The work of the church is not to renounce all understandings and relationships of power as immoral, but to live into life-giving relationships of shared and accountable uses of power in all aspects of existence. This normative claim holds true therefore, for sexual ethics, which I discuss below in Chapter 3.

Conclusions

The Bible is a sacred source of God’s wisdom in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. At times this has led to a false dichotomy of scripture and experience that does not resonate with the Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of the hermeneutic community. The challenge for Mennonites currently is to read scripture in light of the experiences of those most harmed and marginalized and to weigh all sources of moral and theological authority with the norm of liberation from oppression and abundant life for all. An understanding of justice as rooted in the example of Jesus and as normative for a non-violent social ethic is underdeveloped and poses particular challenges for the construction of a Mennonite sexual ethics. Experience as a source for Christian ethics is crucial for moral discernment in conjunction with reading scripture as interpreted in community embodied social creatures is a primary source for Christian ethics. This method, sometimes referred to as the hermeneutical spiral, is used by feminist theologians such as Douglas, Dube, Farley, Fiorenza, Harder, Harrison, Kwok, Ruether, and Trible who value scripture as authoritative when it is discerned in relation to those most vulnerable and read

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with norms of justice, peace, mutuality, liberation, and the mending of creation. A sexual ethics that seeks ecclesial integrity as peace-oriented will also be developed using this method and these norms. For Mennonites, this includes a realized commitment to the experiences of the oppressed, marginalized, and excluded among them and a social and political analysis of how domination and oppression functions in the community of believers to recognize and analyse differences in ecclesial experiences (i.e. operation of power in community through various roles, rules, and regulations). The question now is: what method for an ecclesial ethics is accountable to these norms and embodies Jesus’ moral vision of discipleship in non-violent ways as a subversive memory rooted in social political function, rather than biblical content alone?
Chapter 2: Methodological Issues of Ecclesiology and Discipleship Ethics

An adequate discipleship ethics must be rooted in the lived experiences of individual believers and their community of faith. In this chapter I explore the potential of a feminist approach to Christian ethics as ecclesiology – that is, being and doing church as disciples of Christ. The norms of justice, just-peace/nonviolence, the well-being of women, liberation and reconciliation, love, and inclusive, egalitarian Christ-centred community will frame this project for the terms and conditions of theological and ethical justification of lived discipleship as ecclesial life. I begin by describing and critically engaging the work of key proponents of ecclesiological approaches to ethics by Mennonite theologians Harry Huebner and John Howard Yoder and then examine Stanley Hauerwas’ application of ecclesiology for sexual ethics. In order to determine whether or not these three scholars in their particular approach to ecclesiology as ethics take into account feminist concerns and commitments I turn to selected voices, including Malinda Berry, Karen Guth, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Beverly Harrison, and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite. I will discuss whether or not Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas’ articulation of ecclesiology as ethics could and/or should be amended to function as a nonviolent approach to sexual ethics.

To discern if, and if so how, the paradigm of ecclesiology as ethics articulated by Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas is practiced by the Mennonite church in processes of moral discernment regarding vulnerable people in the community of faith, I engage four key case studies: 1) Matthew 18 and Yoder’s abuses, 2) Lauren Shifflett’s allegations of abuse and stalking against Luke Hartman, then Vice President Enrolment at Eastern Mennonite University, 3) MC USA and LGBTQ inclusion, and 4) use of “loving dialogue” in MC USA and MC Canada church statements and ecclesial discernment processes regarding human sexuality. The following guiding questions frame my work in these case studies: Do Mennonite ecclesial moral discernment processes function to exclude and/or ignore relationships of power within the community of faith? Are these processes of moral reasoning accountable to the sexually marginalized? If not, and they are structured to ignore institutional, personal, and social relationships of power, can the dominant Mennonite understandings and practices of ecclesiology as ethics be transformed and function in liberative, non-violent, ways as a method
for an embodied theological ethics and for sexual ethics committed to the experiences of those who are shamed, excluded, or otherwise bear the burden of the current and predominant ecclesial power relations?

As developed above in Chapter 1, I claim that an approach for doing Christian ethics has the potential to be liberative if it incorporates a critical analysis of intersectional power relations and a commitment to holding the public and private spheres in tension (a feminist claim) in order to discern whether or not it is structured to exclude/and or marginalize those moral subjects who are not male, heterosexual, white, economically stable, and/or able-bodied. As Harrison states, “personal pains” are always connected to “the wider dynamics of the social system.”

Therefore, an embodied feminist Mennonite theo-ethical method will consider the question, “What does it mean to live as disciples of Christ – as a community and as individual members of the community?” by applying a feminist analysis of arrangements of power, beginning with the experiences of believers who have been marginalized, oppressed, and/or excluded by operative relations of dominating power within the Mennonite church with regard to ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology as Ethics

Anabaptist-Mennonite approaches to theology and ethics are grounded in the church as the community of disciples. As such, they resist classification and adherence to a uniform methodology. Early Anabaptists did not claim philosophy as a source of knowledge for ethics. Instead they claimed the Bible, “God’s Word,” as the primary source of God’s wisdom for the church and its lived ethic. Contemporary contributions to theology and ethics from Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives (predominantly the perspectives of male theologians) continue this tradition. In this section I give a critical account of how ecclesiology and ethics function in contemporary Mennonite theological discourse. First I describe the relationship of

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221 Harrison, *Connections*, 247. See Bounds et al, *Welfare Policy*, for an example of how personal and public are related with regard to welfare reform which is “clearly a public issue, subject to debate in the media and in the legislatures,” and also a private issue in that “what have been considered private issues – family, sexuality, race – have been very much part of the debate” (16).

ecclesiology and ethics in the work of Huebner and Yoder. Second, I describe the relationship of ecclesiology and sexual ethics in particular in the work of Hauerwas.

Ecclesiology in the Work of Harry Huebner

In, *The Church as Parable: Whatever happened to ethics?* Harry Huebner analyzes what he calls “the modern, liberal, ‘problem’ of emphasis on the individual and freedom leading to the loss of the ability to think morally and theologically” and in response builds a case for an ethical approach based on scripture and the centrality of God and Jesus in which the church plays an integral role.223 Huebner argues that it is problematic to begin Christian ethics with an issue (e.g. abortion or same-sex marriage) and, in doing so, assume that such a starting point will indicate how to act in various situations. Instead, he argues that Christians should first come to understand how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as members of the church. This experience of discipleship alone will indicate how to live ethically.224 Thus Christian ethics is only possible in terms of what the church is and how to be the church. Following this approach, Huebner is rooted in scriptural accounts of the church as a particular body, which shapes Christian character.225 He thus views Christian ethics as coming after biblical interpretation and Christian theology, which alone provide an account of what it means to be fully human and the people of God.226 A significant characteristic of Huebner’s work is his focus on “being” (i.e. the church as God’s people) distinct from “doing” (i.e. the actions and decisions that flow from and form moral character). A focus on being is interested in the virtues of God and character formation for Christian ethics, which is “to look at how to be the church and who God is.”227 The four defining features of Huebner’s approach to ecclesiology and ethics are: 1) being is primary for doing; 2) decisions flow from moral character; 3) the Christian community is a storied people/community (not primarily about individuals); and 4) moral goodness comes from God alone.228

223 Huebner and Schroeder, *Church as Parable*, x.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid., xi.
226 Ibid.
227 Ibid., 177.
228 Ibid., 86.
Ecclesiology in the Work of John Howard Yoder

Yoder claims that the church is a political body with its own distinct character and ethics based on confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. In order to demonstrate how this ecclesiology functions in contemporary Mennonite theology I briefly describe his approach to ecclesiology as ethics and its two key features – the significance of the lordship of Christ as the starting point for Christian ethics (the church as social ethic) and the task of the church being to “bind” and to “loose” (a distinctive mark of the church) – which I then evaluate in conversation with feminist Mennonite theo-ethicists.

Drawing on the work of Karl Barth, Yoder views the starting point for ethics as the lordship of Christ. In his essay “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics vs. Wider Wisdom,” Yoder claims that Barth’s grounding of social ethics in the confession of Jesus Christ is “the only necessary dualism for social ethics.” Because the church embodies the Good News through its exemplarity as foretaste or model of the Kingdom of God, Yoder argues that ecclesiology actually is social ethics. Yoder states: “our common confession, our being-social as believers, is the ‘first fruits’ of that promise’s being more than a promise, of its being real good news because it has already begun, and of its being social in its essence, not only by implication.” For this reason, he argues against any framework for ethics located in wider wisdom, such as natural law, and against allowing particular moral issues defined by secular society to dictate the terms of Christian ethics. Like Huebner, Yoder argues that the narrative quality of the church’s doing ethics locates the moment of decision-making in the communal story of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In this way, it is character that dictates action and therefore it is character formation that must be the focus of Christian ethics.

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229 Yoder, The Royal Priesthood, 103.
230 Ibid., 104.
231 Ibid., 110-113.
232 Ibid., 122. See also Yoder’s essay, “A People in the World,” The Royal Priesthood, which emphasizes the importance of character and discipleship for social ethics (72) and the fact that the church is not the bearer or result of a message, but actually is the work of God as it models a new social wholeness (74). For more on Yoder’s ecclesiology see, for example, “‘Patience’ as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship ‘Absolute’?” in The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder, ed. Hauerwas et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) and For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).
Yoder argues that the distinct marks of the church – as both the medium for the Kingdom of God and the Gospel message itself – describe the church’s mission and its relationship with the world.\(^{233}\) Rather than remaining separate from the world (as Mennonites are depicted), the church is called today to be what the world is called to be ultimately.\(^{234}\) In *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*, Yoder names “five sample ways in which the Christian church is called to operate as polis” based on the practices of the early church and as reflected in the New Testament.\(^{235}\) Here Yoder understands *polis* as “political,” which is to say the way in which believers live together and make decisions as the church. To be church is, according to Yoder, to be political, but in a different way compared to society given the church’s commitment to faith in Christ and its ensuing discipleship ethics, as demonstrated in its worship practices.\(^{236}\) One of the five paradigms for the world that the church offers as foretaste of the Kingdom of God is the ecclesial practice of binding and loosing. Here Yoder is drawing on Jesus’ words in Matthew: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt.18:18, NRSV). Immediately prior, Jesus outlines the process of reconciliation and forgiveness saying:

> If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Mt. 18: 15-17).

According to Yoder, this practice relates directly to the politics of the church. He writes: “To ‘bind’ in rabbinic usage is to respond to a question of ethical discernment...To ‘loose’ is to free from obligation: In the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had warned that whoever ‘looses’ any commandment will be ‘the least in the kingdom.’ Thus the activity has two dimensions [for the church as *polis*]: moral discernment and reconciliation.”\(^{237}\)

Yoder celebrates how the process of discernment and reconciliation articulated in Matthew 18 differs from other understandings of community discipline. For Yoder, the benefits

\(^{233}\) Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 77.  
\(^{234}\) Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix.  
\(^{235}\) Ibid., xi.  
\(^{236}\) Ibid., ix and 81 (endnote 5).  
\(^{237}\) Ibid., 2.
of Matthew 18 are as follows: the process is communal rather than clergy-led; the intention is restorative, not punitive; offenses of any kind (major or minor) are weighed and then always forgivable; and “[t]he intention is not to protect the church’s reputation or to teach onlookers the seriousness of sin, but only to serve the offender’s own well-being by restoring her or him to the community.” Reconciliation and the authority to forgive is a task of the community, rather than the priesthood. Furthermore, reconciliation only occurs when all relevant parties participate in the process – an individual cannot do it alone. He contrasts this process of communal reconciliation with, for example, judicial systems. The Apostle Paul, Yoder notes, “urged the believers in Corinth not to litigate in pagan courts (1 Cor. 6:1-8).” Interpreting Paul, Yoder locates the authority to resolve grievances between believers and within the church, “among the saints,” rather than secular authorities/courts of law (1 Cor. 6 1-8). In this way, Yoder argues, that initiative within this process is personal. It is led by those directly impacted rather than clergy or secular authorities.

Both Huebner and Yoder claim that ecclesiology is ethics – an understanding that has and continues to shape contemporary Mennonite theological discourses and church practices generally. For Huebner, ecclesiology is the starting point for Christian ethics because the church is a social and political body (i.e. its own distinct society shaped by the political nature of each member’s commitment to discipleship in Jesus, which “[offers] the world real social/political alternatives”) that shapes Christian character; in turn character enables moral-decision making where being is prior to and shapes doing. Similarly, Yoder argues that “access to social ethics should consist in the exemplarity of the church as foretaste/model/herald of the Kingdom of God.” Confessing the lordship of Christ necessarily makes a difference for Christian ethics and means that the church is the agent of moral discernment. For both, a focus on virtues and character formation, the centrality of scripture, and the importance of the Christian community rather than personal freedom and autonomy are important for ethics.

238 Ibid., 3.
239 Ibid.
240 Ibid., 4.
241 Ibid., 2.
242 Huebner and Schroeder, Church as Parable, 46.
243 Ibid., x.
244 Yoder, The Royal Priesthood, 106.
245 Ibid., 94.
Ecclesiology as Sexual Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas

Though not a Mennonite, theo-ethicist Stanley Hauerwas is influenced by the work of John Howard Yoder and self-identifies with many characteristics of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology. In, *Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Hauerwas develops an approach to Christian sexual ethics that is consistent with his broader argument, which “reassert[s] the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself.”246 Like Yoder, he emphasizes the close relationship between ethics, ecclesiology, and theology as formed only within the community of faith. For him, an account of Christian ethics must be based firmly and solely on the agenda of the Christian community’s self-understanding.247 Thus, his starting point for sexual ethics is the church’s mission and its implications for living in right relationship as sexual beings,248 where sex can be a sign of faithfulness to the Kingdom of God,249 and marriage a sign of hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God.250 The task of Christian sexual ethics is to discern the virtues and character necessary to enable sex and marriage to function in these ways.251

Like Yoder and Huebner, Hauerwas names ecclesiology as integrally related to ethics. To begin with ecclesiology for sexual ethics means allowing confession of Jesus as Lord to make a difference. It means valuing the narratives, virtues, and character that shape a distinctly Christian understanding of sexuality and approach to sexual ethics. Hauerwas discerns what kind of community the church should be in order to determine how to act, for instance, with regard to abortion.252 Ignoring arguments of whether or not a fetus is a person, he focuses on what kind of people “Christians” ought to be in order to welcome children into the world.253 In this way, he considers the implications of character formation in the community of faith for the context of the

246 Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 1.
247 Ibid., 182.
248 Ibid., 176.
249 Ibid., 191.
250 Ibid., 193.
252 Ibid., 220.
253 Ibid., 229.
world that children will live in. He does not, in this case, show concern for Christian character formation as it relates to how pregnancy happens (i.e., sexual relationships).

Critical Dialogue with Huebner

I affirm a focus on being/character formation and the value of ecclesiology for Christian ethics. I agree with Huebner that the “primary task [for Christian ethics] is becoming the people who, by God’s grace, are able to witness to the new world by participating in it.”

Ethics and right relationships flow from the character and virtues learned in the community of faith. The question Huebner fails to ask, however, is: whose experience in particular informs the story-formed character and virtues of the community of faith? Are these the experiences of the least among us that advocate living gospel values of peace, justice, and love? Or are they the stories of those with the greatest access to social power and privilege? Does character formation within the community reinforce the status quo? What are the unexamined consequences and communal effects of lived ecclesiology and lived ethics? A focus on character formation within the community of faith must begin with naming relationships of power.

A critical analysis of power as relational and a theology of shared power exemplifying Christian discipleship is lacking across the dominant understandings and practices of ecclesiology as ethics. This is demonstrated most notably via Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas’ lack of attention to whose experiences in particular shape the character formation and lived ethics of the believing community. Each of them assumes that community ethics are shaped by the experiences of all believers. Yet, in reality, this is not the case. Huebner’s inattention to power relations within the community of faith is evidenced by his unwillingness to discern the significance of gendered experiences and gendered relations of power for Christian ethics (i.e. character formation within the Church as shaped by embodied and social factors). He, along with his co-author David Schroeder, claims that “endeavors within feminism and masculinism, which would espouse that we must understand ourselves fundamentally in our femaleness or in our maleness, are theologically misguided and are in danger of fanning the flames of inter-gender

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254 Huebner and Schroeder, Church as Parable, xii.
conflict.” For Huebner, the church is the most important moral agent. The primary task of Christian ethics is discerning how the self is/ought to be formed within the church to be created as God created the church to be.\

While persons are certainly not reducible to their gender, gender is an inescapable aspect of human experience – deeply impacting the ways in which people relate to the world, each other, and God. Norms of gender and other social identity markers such as ability, age, class, and race are formed by relationships of power. For these reasons, most feminist and queer scholars are suspicious of attempts to avoid gender as a category of critical import and see privilege being re-asserted for example when scholars distance themselves from their own gender and other socially significant identities. Avoidance of the issue can signal that certain people’s experiences of gender are not important and even invalid or scorned in discerning the theo-ethics of the church. It also indicates complicity in allowing gendered relations of power to operate. An adequate ecclesiological approach to Christian ethics must affirm the variety of people’s experiences related to gender, sexuality, and other social markers as legitimate sources for Christian ethics and also acknowledge they are governed by systems of structured power. With this affirmation comes a critical analysis of power relations within the Church and a commitment to the experiences of those who are marginalized, excluded, and oppressed because of their gender.

Critical Dialogue with Yoder

Certain key elements remain underdeveloped in Yoder’s ecclesiology, namely: a relational understanding of power – operating systemically in social (family, church etc.), economic and political structures; knowledge of the ways in which a public/private split functions in the community of faith; and a critical analysis of whose voices in particular shape the ethics of the community of faith. For example, Yoder’s articulation of “binding” and “loosing” as a practice

255 Huebner and Schroeder, *Church as Parable*, xi.
256 Ibid.
that embodies the ethics of the Christian polis does not detail an explicit commitment to standards or outcomes.²⁵⁷

According to Yoder, a primary component of the mandate to “bind” and to “loose” with regard to moral discernment and forgiveness is that the “dialogical reconciling process must come first. Only then must we turn to talk of the set of standards that this process enforces.” He goes on to say: “Much Christian debate about moral issues makes the mistake of concentrating on what the standards ought to be rather than on how they are to be discerned and implemented.”²⁵⁸ How can this be? A dialogical reconciling process is the product of existing relationships of power within the community of faith. It is not neutral. In other words, an emphasis on dialogue cannot escape the necessity of norms and outcomes for Christian ethics/discipleship. The question is which norms and outcomes. This is why I argue that ecclesial processes of moral reasoning and discernment must pay attention in particular to the various experiences of its most vulnerable members. This accountability includes a commitment to the well-being of women and LGBTQ persons to guide/shape a commitment to dialogue on sexuality. In this way, the ecclesia and hermeneutic community remain integral for Christian ethics in community without compromising the importance of personal experience, particularly those of the marginalized, oppressed, and excluded within the community as potential sources of the Holy Spirit’s leading.

An emphasis on moral norms is key to being church (i.e. to faithful ecclesial discernment). Norms (i.e. standards of discernment) are found in scripture and other sources of wisdom including the lived experiences of believers through the Spirit’s leading. Denouncing norms and the significance of outcomes is particularly dangerous for those whose well-being is not guaranteed by existing and often unnamed yet assumed norms operating in relationships of power within the community of faith. Norms are criteria for governing discernment processes as standards for accountability in ways of being and doing; they are necessary to illumine how power is secured, contested and functions in roles, rules, and relationships within the community of faith. It is therefore inaccurate to assume that the ecclesia will be a community of shared power that automatically produces relationships of healing and reconciliation. The testimonies

²⁵⁷ Yoder, Body Politics, 6. See Matthew 18 for the source of this principle.
²⁵⁸ Ibid.
and theoethical contributions of feminist-Mennonite women reveal the grave necessity of all due attention to the consequences of current ecclesial arrangements in order to transform harmful even if unintended outcomes for the sake of discipleship of all.

Yoder’s view of “binding” and “loosing” does not attend to the experiences and needs of victims/survivors. Noting the ways in which this congregational process of binding and loosing differs from some other forms of community discipline, Yoder writes: “The intention is not to protect the church’s reputation or to teach onlookers the seriousness of sin, but only to serve the offender’s own well-being by restoring her or him to the community.” Yoder highlights the process’s attention to the offender’s well-being, but noticeably makes no reference to its attention to the victim-survivor’s well-being. Binding and loosing is thus focused primarily on the goal of the community of faith forgiving and reconciling the offender. As Yoder says, “the intention is winning [i.e. reconciling] the brother or sister, not punishment.” He concludes his section on binding and loosing with a reference to its application for Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs, which do incorporate a concern for both victims and offenders in the reconciliation process. However, Yoder’s nod in this direction does not go far enough to explain how the process of binding and loosing is safe for victim-survivors – particularly given Yoder’s emphasis on reconciling the offender to the community with no mention of what is at stake for the victim-survivor.

An emphasis on the well-being of the offender to the detriment of the victim-survivor is further enabled by the fact that Yoder ignores how power operates in unequal relationships within the community of faith and between victims and offenders. Yoder claims that all believers (i.e., victims and offenders) can “pursue reconciling confrontation because we trust one another and because we asked to be placed under this kind of loving guidance.” Yet, as Melanie A. May notes, this kind of confrontation has more often led to abuses of power and authority than to life-giving forms of accountability and mutuality by privileging the community over the

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259 Ibid., 3.
260 Ibid., 4.
261 Ibid., 5.
individual, private over public communication, and forgiveness at the expense of genuine healing and justice-making.²⁶²

Communal well-being is also privileged over individual well-being in Yoder’s view of binding and loosing. This occurs most notably when subordination and obedience to the community of faith as moral agent are prioritized over individual moral agency. Again, this relates to Yoder’s inattention to the experiences of victim-survivors and over emphasis on the role of the community in reconciling the offender. He fails to note that communal well-being is always the well-being of particular individuals in the community of faith since not all members are granted equal authority in the community.

Yet another red flag for victim-survivors is the fact that Matthew 18 privileges private communication over public communication. Victims and offenders are encouraged to work directly together toward reconciliation before involving another person and then, if necessary, involving the community to provide some safety for the vulnerable and ground rules for communication. This kind of privacy in the beginning of the process is dangerous because it fosters secrecy around abuse and thus provides a protective shield for ongoing abuses of power to occur. Additionally, May reveals how privacy makes the possibility of genuine forgiveness suspect. She writes: “my experience teaches me that if privacy is privileged, forgiveness may bottle up what an offense or abusive act stirs up. Forgiveness may function as the flip side of guilt and give in to the perpetrator’s cry for relief from responsibility.”²⁶³ Thus, by privileging community, privacy, and forgiveness in these ways, Matthew 18 does not adequately address the ways in which power operates in individual, personal, communal, and social relationships within the community of faith and, as a result, ends up favouring the abuser rather than working for reconciliation through relationships of shared power and mutuality. By emphasizing Matthew 18’s understanding of binding and loosing for Christian ethics Yoder fails to notice dominating power in the inequity of the process itself in its emphasis on the well-being of the offender whereas the well-being of the victim/survivor is of less or little account.

²⁶³ Ibid.
The dangers of privacy and strict adherence to the principals of Matthew 18 (the rule of Christ taken as to bind and to loose) are particularly real for survivors of sexual abuse and gender based violence. Evidence shows that survivors of abuse are vulnerable to ongoing abuse, manipulation, and trauma when forced into an ongoing relationship with their abuser(s).\textsuperscript{264} Harder reveals how this is the case in the history of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. She states:

Mennonite women have experienced the power of ‘brotherly’ admonition, as it was usually called, used against them . . . Though no comparison has been made between the public confession required of women disciplined for sexual activity resulting in pregnancy and the silence surrounding sexual abuse by male members of the community, it is clear that Mennonites have only recently applied peace teachings to the issue of violence against women. The rule of Christ can therefore be understood as having at least two primary functions within the Mennonite community. It has been used to counter the authority and power of alternative community structures. It has also been used to enforce conformity to community norms that encouraged women’s inferior status.\textsuperscript{265}

Harder’s research further reveals the problematic nature of processes of reconciliation and discernment that fail to pay attention to relationships of power and the need for the norm of women’s well-being, which is promoted by the biblical values of justice, peace, and love, to guide Christian ethics.

While Yoder acknowledges the church as polis and the political as “matters of power, of rank and of money,”\textsuperscript{266} he idealizes the church’s ability to provide guidance and fair mediation in processes of reconciliation. Again, an analysis of relations of power within the ecclesia is missing – even though Yoder acknowledges the ecclesia as a political community. From his perspective, the political community is called to embody particular relationships of power. Yoder values the communal story of those who confess Jesus as Lord (which shapes Christian ethics/discipleship). However, he fails to consider the narrative’s potential to be oppressive. Whose story is the story of the community? As Mennonite women and queer persons have

\textsuperscript{264} From the vast literature on this subject see for example Joy M. K. Bussert, \textit{Battered Women: From an Ethic of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment} (New York, NY: Lutheran Church in America, 1986); Carol Penner, \textit{Healing Waters: Churches Working to End Violence Against Women} (Toronto, ON: Women’s Inter Church Council of Canada, 2004); and Shelly Rambo, \textit{Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{265} Harder, \textit{Obedience}, 45.

\textsuperscript{266} Yoder, \textit{Body Politics}, ix.
argued, the story of the community of faith has been shaped by the experiences of some, namely those in leadership positions and with greater social privilege (often synonymous), at the expense of others, namely lay persons and those with less social privilege. Because power operating in all roles, rules, and regulations has the potential to operate in dominating ways, including within the community of faith, questions of ethics, namely of being and action as moral agents, must always begin with questions about operations of power. For this reason, it is not enough to focus, as Yoder does, on discernment and implementation for ethics. Without a commitment to the well-being of women and liberation for all from oppression through nonviolence (e.g. just-peace) and assessment of outcomes with internal accountability, ecclesiology as ethics is inadequate and even dangerous.

Inattention to the lived realities of power inequalities within the community of faith is, in part, the result of an overemphasis in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology on the eschatological vision of the church as perfect, “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph. 5:27) and the belief that disciples of Jesus can live fully and presently into the Kingdom of God. High moral standards, such as a commitment to nonviolence, are not, in and of themselves problematic. However, they must be coupled with a certain realism, framed for example by Reinhold Niebuhr, that acknowledges the present brokenness of the church – including the potential for destructive and dominating relations of power that enable some to exploit, manipulate, and coerce to exist within the church.\footnote{I am thinking in particular of Reinhold Niebuhr’s emphasis on the biblical paradox that human beings are both good, a reflection of the imago Dei, and also finite and sinful, which he articulates in The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964).} In order to be life-giving (that is to be justice-seeking and peace-oriented) ethical reflection must, as Eleanor Haney articulates, “move between the poles of analysis of what exists and construction [or vision] of what might be.”\footnote{Davies et. al., Redefining Sexual Ethics, xi} An ideal moral vision, as well as a realistic view of relationships of power within the church presently, are both necessary.

Karen Guth also critiques Mennonite or what she refers to as “witness” theology’s overemphasis on perfection and its inattention to the church’s potential to malfom its members.\footnote{Guth cites Robin W. Lovin, Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011), 45-66. Guth explains that the integrity or “witness” stance is a variation on the Christian stance identified by Lovin. This stance “emphasizes the distinctiveness of Christian communities – especially their espousal of pacifism – amid the larger culture” (Guth, Christian Ethics at the Boundaries, 2).} She draws on realist theology and feminist theology in order to reveal the
constructive potential of Yoder’s approach to ethics as ecclesiology for political theology or “public” theology. From a realist position she critique’s Yoder’s ecclesial optimism that the Christian community can live fully into the Kingdom of God here and now through radical nonviolent discipleship. She writes: “[Niebuhr’s] emphasis on the role of Christianity in fostering self-criticism and in the practices of the church in cultivating humility and hope both contribute to realism in the form of ecclesiology and offer welcome antidotes to the overconfident and idealized expressions of the church’s political mission promulgated by witness theologians.”

Yoder’s ecclesiology is problematic because it “places too much confidence in the power of Christians to live now as in the kingdom of God” and, therefore, does not pay enough attention to the realities of injustice and sin within the church, leaving room for relationships of dominating power to go unchecked. Guth argues that the underlying problem is “not so much his church-world dualism but his over-identification of the state with the ‘world.’”

Guth also highlights the importance of feminist theologies for witness (and realist) theologians. In particular, she claims that witness theologians could benefit from feminists’ careful and nuanced work reflecting on the relationship between the theological and the political. To reconfigure witness theology’s oppressive elements for liberative ends using feminist theology, Guth suggests the following: 1) a broader definition of violence as systemic and that which perpetuates women’s oppression and internal forms of violence that destroy a person’s sense of wholeness; 2) an expanded view of the political and power as that which extends to the ecclesia and the task of theology; and 3) a corresponding analysis of power that explores relationships of power within the church.

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271 Ibid., 120.
272 Ibid., 121.
273 Like Guth, I use the term realist to refer to political realist theologians working in the tradition of twentieth-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (Guth, *Christian Ethics at the Boundary*, 10). These are theologians who share a concern with “witness” theologians Christian views ought to be distinguishable from those of wider culture and that they offer resources for identifying and addressing oppressive relationships in society. However, different from “witness” theologians, they focus more heavily on the doctrines of sin and anthropology to “underscore both the limits and possibilities of Christian ethical action” rather than on ecclesiology (Ibid.).
274 Ibid., 17.
275 Ibid., 63.
276 Ibid., 59-60.
277 Ibid., 60.
Guth’s work at the boundaries of feminist and witness theo-ethics reveals the potential of a feminist-Mennonite approach to sexual ethics. She names underdeveloped aspects and gaps in dominant understandings of ecclesiology as ethics from a feminist realist perspective. She also demonstrates the ways in which these are failures of Mennonite theology to live up to its own mandates. For example, a theo-ethical method that does not attend to relations of power within the ecclesia and operating within the task of doing theology, is not nonviolent. In this way, Yoder’s approach to Christian ethics does not measure up to its own commitment to character formation and implementation that follows in the example of Christ’s nonviolence.

Guth also reveals similarities and shared commitments between feminists and Mennonites and, as a result, the value of bringing them into conversation with one another. Perhaps most significantly (for the future of ecclesiology as ethics) Guth claims that “feminist and womanist responses to systemic violence contribute to the kind of ecclesial witness of peace Yoder called for in his theology.” These responses offer insights for preventing the very violence that Yoder himself perpetrated against women.

Case Study: Matthew 18 and Yoder’s Abuses

The most damning evidence of the inadequacies and dangers of John Howard Yoder’s view of binding and loosing are the ways in which it did not support victim-survivors of Yoder’s own sexual abuse, nor did it prevent further harm from being done. In the late 1970’s, having learned of several women who had come forward with allegations against Yoder of sexual abuse, then President of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Marlin Miller, and Yoder sought to follow the guidelines of Matthew 18 to work toward reconciliation and forgiveness with these women. The first step in doing so was for Yoder to meet one on one with each of the women who had voiced allegations against him. Miller was aware that Yoder wanted to work towards reconciliation in this manner and at one point intended to contact the women who had come forward in an effort to convince them to

278 Ibid., 151.
279 Ibid.
280 Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast,’” 33.
meet with Yoder for this purpose.²⁸¹ But before this could happen it became clear to Miller through his conversations with Yoder that Yoder did not believe he had anything to apologize for and would not admit any wrong doing to these women should they meet.²⁸² As a result, Miller eventually shifted his conversation with Yoder to fulfilling the next part of Matthew 18: “But if you are not listened to [by the church member who sinned against you], take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Mt. 18:16, RSV). To do so, Miller formed a group of seminary advisors to join him in addressing the problem of Yoder’s behaviour.²⁸³ According to historian Rachel Goossen, this group met semi-regularly for three years and in October 1980 agreed to a “Covenantal Agreement” with Yoder which affirmed Yoder’s continued employment at AMBS and “noted that no punitive measures would be applied. However the covenant required Yoder to initiate steps toward healing and reconciliation wherever his actions had caused injury.”²⁸⁴ Goossen also relays that “[c]ovenant members agreed to not speak of this to others and regarded their agreement as the ‘successful conclusion of the second step of the Matthew 18 ‘rule of Christ’ process, namely the step of the brother’s having heard the two or three witnesses.’”²⁸⁵

The decision to maintain confidentiality in this application of Matthew 18 is a clear example of how the privatization of reconciliation processes can be dangerous for victims of abuse and add to the trauma they have already experienced. In this particular case, privacy made it dangerous for victims of Yoder’s abuse to participate in the reconciliation process, which stunted the process and, since no further measures were taken, enabled Yoder to continue his abusive behaviour. Here the importance of public processes of accountability and third party involvement in the case of sexual abuse is made clear once more and demonstrates the way in which Matthew 18 is insufficient and dangerous as a model for ethics (i.e., if it reinforces a public-private split and fails to address relationships of power between victims and offenders).

As Matthew 18 continued to be applied in the Yoder case additional problems regarding power surfaced and further highlighted the inadequacy of the process for victim-survivors. At

²⁸¹ Ibid.
²⁸² Ibid., 34.
²⁸³ Ibid., 39.
²⁸⁴ Ibid.
²⁸⁵ Ibid.
one point in the process of reconciliation the Covenant Group and Yoder signed a covenant that encouraged conversations between Yoder and the women he had abused [note that these women had not been involved in the process thus far]. However, “[w]hen Miller, in an effort to jump-start this process, contacted individuals whom he knew to have been violated, he discovered that they were unwilling to participate.”

Miller’s ignorance regarding the unequal relationships of power at play, which made interactions between Yoder and victim-survivors of his abuse unsafe, impeded any attempts at genuine reconciliation and mutual accountability. As Goossen asserts: “[t]he seminary’s interest in arranging reconciliatory meetings for its own peace theologian ran afoul of the women’s interests. What victim of sexual abuse wished for face-to-face contact with Yoder, either alone or in the presence of his institutional backers?”

Yoder, in response, argued that he could not proceed with the process of reconciliation without his accusers present. This attempt at reconciliation in the Yoder case clearly demonstrates the ways in which power operates oppressively within institutions and between individuals – in this case between Yoder, a celebrated Mennonite theologian who was also white, heterosexual, married, and male, and his female accusers who were frequently students with little, if any, institutional influence.

From 1991-1992 Matthew 18 was used again to attempt a process of reconciliation with Yoder, this time by the church that Yoder was attending, Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana. By that time there was greater knowledge of Yoder’s abuses and the failures of prior attempts at using Matthew 18 with Yoder – causing those individuals involved in the process of reconciliation at Prairie Street to begin speaking about power. Most notably, they rejected Yoder’s interpretation of Matthew 18 in favour of one that was aware of the ways in which power operates oppressively within institutions and communities of faith. Leaders at Prairie Street named a commitment to beginning processes of reconciliation by genuinely listening to the stories of those who come forward to with allegations of abuse – in this case the women who voiced complaints against Yoder. Yoder’s notion that reconciliation and discernment begin with a level playing field of power with all parties involved was debunked, but at a devastating cost.

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286 Goossen, “‘Defanging the Beast,’” 39.
287 Ibid., 41.
288 Ibid., 41-42.
289 Ibid., 53.
290 Ibid.
Yoder’s privilege, not only as a white, straight, male theologian working in the patriarchal constructs of the academy, but as the prodigious and prolific theologian of the Mennonite community, combined with his self-identification as a member of a marginalized community of faith in wider society (i.e. Mennonite), led him, and the institutions in which he worked and worshipped, to ignore relationships of power in the hermeneutic community and helped perpetuate the violence he committed against women. In an article in which she considers how and if it is appropriate to use Yoder’s work in light of his sexual abuses, Malinda Berry states:

[m]y view is that, alone, Yoder’s work does not offer us a sufficient analysis of power that helps us understand what is happening theologically in faith communities where we perpetuate cycles of violence and injustice. Rather, Yoder becomes an example of how we have perpetuated these things. Defending and/or excusing Yoder, like avoiding him altogether, are some of the things that contribute to this cycle, a cycle that we are now able to say, needs to end. 291

To reiterate, the Mennonite denomination’s history as a persecuted church, and resulting self-identification as “marginalized,” may tempt privileged members of the community of faith, as is indicated in the case of Yoder, to overlook existing forms of injustice and inequality in theological and ethical constructs of the hermeneutic community and in the lived practices of the Mennonite church by denying, for example, “the power and authority that comes with education, economic security, denominational identity, race or gender.”292 Yoder’s theological justification of his sexual abuses and the silence of Mennonite institutions on the matter, which were, at least in part produced by this inattentiveness to internal ecclesial injustice, indicate the urgent need for a theory of power in relation as a requisite element of an approach to social/sexual ethics that is liberating for all.

The merits of Yoder’s theo-ethics are further complicated by the fact that on several accounts he promoted feminist theology and identified its compatibility with and necessity for his own work. In the aftermath of his abuses, scholars have referenced and reflected on Yoder’s positioning himself in feminist circles in their attempts to discern whether or not his work should

291 Berry, “Avoiding Avoidance.”
292 Harder, Obedience, 139. Additionally, whether or not members of the community of faith claim an identity as marginalized, a critical analysis of power relations is necessary since, as mujerista, womanist, and postcolonial theologians have argued, people who are at the margins of some systems of power can also be at the centers of other systems of power. See Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible.”
still be engaged. For example, Guth appeals to Yoder’s positive references to feminist theology to draw support for feminist theology amongst Yoderians. While her intention is to draw support for feminist theology by revealing the connections between feminist and witness theologies, an important question remains: why are the voices of Mennonite women feminists not authoritative for witness theologians such that a case for feminist theology needs to come from Yoderians in order to be taken seriously? Furthermore, by what criteria is Yoder a feminist? Yes, Yoder volunteered for and became the faculty advisor for a seminary course entitled, “Women in Church and Society,” which evolved from a feminist consciousness-raising group of seminary and surrounding community women at AMBS. However, Krehbiel notes that Yoder’s wife, Anne Guth Yoder attended these meetings with Yoder because she was concerned that her husband had ulterior motives for being there – namely, that he was potentially interested in pursuing sexual relationships with the women there.

Without direct engagement with those who suffer due to systemic injustice, an ethics has no accountability or credibility. Furthermore, without actions and social change (effect in conjunction with intention) to accompany a commitment to the oppressed, as in the case of Yoder’s abuses, ecclesial ethics remains inadequate. Yoder’s affirmations of feminism cannot automatically function as support for his theology because he denied feminist commitments and norms in practice. As Barbara Graber writes:

The pacifist theology of the Mennonite Church is nothing but a sham until the men of the church become willing to apply an equal amount of passion for peace to their relationship with their Sisters in Christ and work to stop violence against women and children in their own homes and congregations. They could start by including the ethical ironies of John Howard Yoder’s life in their study of his work.

Again it is clear that norms and mechanisms of accountability to lived-world outcomes of right relations are necessary means of guiding the theo-ethics of the community of faith. These

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293 Guth’s emphasis on Yoder’s feminism as a reason why Yoderians and witness theologians ought to engage feminist theology is evident throughout her book *Christian Ethics at the Boundary*. On one occasion she argues that Hauerwas would do well to draw from Yoder’s identification of feminism as intrinsic to Christian identity and ecclesial politics (44).
encourage individual members to live lives rooted in the ethics of Jesus, and thus to embody nonviolence and to seek liberation for all.

In sum, Yoder’s emphasis on reconciliation versus punitive authority is a positive aspect of his work that aims to work toward nonviolence and right relationships. However, his idealistic view of the relationships within the community of believers does not do enough to consider the ways in which attempts at reconciliation can do more harm than good by ignoring injustice within the church, re-traumatizing victims and not holding perpetrators to account and repentance in action. Believers cannot necessarily trust one another because of the relationships of uneven power that operate among them – especially exacerbated in the power dynamics between victims and offenders as is demonstrated most clearly in Yoder’s use of Matthew 18 in the processes of reconciliation regarding his own sexual misconduct.

Critical Dialogue with Hauerwas

Like Huebner and Yoder, Hauerwas’ understanding of ecclesiology as ethics does not pay adequate attention to ecclesial relations of power. Two scholars who demonstrate how this is the case are Gloria Albrecht and Miguel De La Torre. Albrecht assesses the ways in which Hauerwas fails to seriously consider how power operates within the church. She writes:

Hauerwas [does not] question the power relations that actually exist within church communities and the effective silencing of voices that might challenge the views they assume. Essentially, the authority-of-clergy vs. the authority-of-community debate . . . conceals the reality that authority in either case lies within the hands of (predominantly white) male clerical or (predominantly white) male communal leadership. The obvious problematic consequences for women and men of color is that an authentic understanding of scripture requires submission to the authority and discipline of a (white) male dominated institutional church, its self-defined traditions, its seminaries, and its professional disciplines. Nonetheless, Hauerwas . . . argue[s] that only by this authority and under this discipline, Christians learn to ‘see’ their world. Without this authority, we do not ‘see’ as Christians.

296 Yoder, Body Politics, 5.
For this reason, Albrecht argues that Christians must be committed to utilizing a tradition of diversity and resistance and to understanding how myths, stories and traditions are patriarchal, racist, and hierarchical. Which and whose stories form the character of the community of believers? Stories that are not liberative for all persons and creation must not function in normative ways for the community’s ethics.

De La Torre’s critique of Hauerwas follows Albrecht’s. He claims that while Hauerwas notes his social location as a “white southerner from the lower-middle classes who grew up embedded in the practices of segregation,” he “fails to admit how his moral reasoning is contextualized within his social location.” According to De La Torre, Hauerwas “readily admits that he has ‘no idea how deeply the habits of racism are written into [his] life’: nevertheless, he refuses to use the voices of the marginalized to either raise his own consciousness or inform his ethical analysis.” For this reason, De La Torre is highly critical of Hauerwas’ ethics. For De La Torre, praxis in solidarity with marginalized persons and their communities are litmus tests of an adequate social ethics. If Hauerwas fails to examine and recognize the significance of his own social privilege, how can he produce an adequate ethics that does so? As De La Torre claims:

[Hauerwas’] major proposition – that a narrative ethics based on Jesus teaches him to be a pacifist – is too simplistic. Although he may be advocating pacifism, his dismissal of marginalized voices makes him and his ethics complicit with an institutional violence that, like war, is also responsible for death. Jesus may have taught Hauerwas not to kill, but Hauerwas failed to learn from Jesus that death does not come solely from the barrel of a gun. Death is also caused by economic, social, and political structures.

A renewed focus on ecclesiology as ethics is not inherently the problem. Rather, at issue is the particular ecclesiology espoused. De La Torre critiques Hauerwas’ ecclesiology as ethics for lacking critical social analysis and an inadequate definition of violence which does not encompass social, economic, and political violations and is therefore not liberative, nor adequate.

300 Ibid.
301 Ibid.
This analysis coheres with the case of abuse sustained by Lauren Shifflett, which I discuss below.

Lydia Harder also critiques Hauerwas’ ecclesiology. She claims that Hauerwas uses the term “church” to “hide assumptions that implicitly justify the continued androcentric patriarchal church.” According to Harder, Hauerwas assumes that the public realm of the church is the real church and thus reinforces a public/private split in the Christian community, which translates to its theo-ethics. She finds that in his articulation of “church” Hauerwas fails to recognize that women tend to participate primarily in private forms of ministry (e.g. teaching Sunday school, preparing meals, leading Bible study). Men, on the other hand, frequently participate in more public forms of ministry such as official leadership positions (e.g. preaching, worship leading, deacons), which have greater influence in decision making processes. Harder also notes that the term “church” functions to hide the male orientation of the community that Hauerwas addresses – a scholarly audience that is largely male. In response, she calls on scholars such as Hauerwas to engage the perspectives of women and those typically relegated to the so-called private sphere for theo-ethical conversation. In other words, she claims that ethics begins with the experiences of the marginalized and there are marginalized persons within the community of faith itself.

A second problematic assumption that Hauerwas makes is that “the ‘patterns of domination’ by which we in the church are captured are the same for women and men.” Like Albrecht and De La Torre, Harder recognizes that gendered relationships of power remain unchecked within Hauerwas’ view of the church as political community. She finds that Hauerwas fails to directly address the issue of violence against women in his discussion of the politics of sex. As a result, “The politics of community can therefore easily become a justification of certain forms of faithfulness between marriage partners which favor the dominance of the male.” Harder also claims that in much of his work Hauerwas is not adequately relationship-specific in his understandings of power and authority. She writes: 

Hauerwas speaks about the church giving up Constantinian power in its relationship to society and thus willingly using the tactic of the weak rather than

303 Ibid., 153.
304 Ibid., 154.
305 Ibid.
the strategy of the strong. However, the church is also an institution which represents divine authority and power to those *within the church* who often feel weak. Thus discipline when it is initiated by the powerful in the church for those who feel weak often feels coercive and violent. This power relationship must also be addressed, because a denial of the power which comes with an association with the divine only heightens the possibility of abuse and violence.\(^{306}\)

She thus illuminates the potential risks of understanding ecclesiology uncritically as an adequate approach to ethics.

The question of whether or not ecclesiology is inherently flawed, and not simply inadequately articulated and practiced by, for example Hauerwas, warrants further exploration. De La Torre is helpful in this regard. He names what could be an inherent flaw in appealing to ecclesiology as ethics. De La Torre claims that ecclesiology, in “focusing on how the church is to *be* rather than to *have* [or do] a social ethics . . . moves the discourse to the abstract of what it means to *be*. Such abstract discussions have little or no value for those whose very survival depends on the church doing a social ethics.”\(^{307}\)

Is he correct?

Unlike De La Torre, I question whether Hauerwas’ ecclesiology is only in abstraction. De La Torre refers to Hauerwas’ ecclesiology as sectarian. Yet, Hauerwas’ ecclesiology links character formation with discipleship, ethics, and behaviour. In his approach to sexual ethics, addressing the topic of abortion, Hauerwas arrives at practice or doing ethics as that which flows from ecclesiology. Clearly both character and conduct are essential for Christian ethics. Character formation is shaped by narratives, but narratives are also shaped by and through conduct. Where I agree with De La Torre, is that Hauerwas does not pay enough attention to the contextual nature of the character and conduct formed by the politics of the community of faith in existing articulations of ecclesiology as ethics.

Albrecht and De La Torre’s ecclesiologies are rooted in a gospel for and unto those who bear the burdens of unjust arrangements and operations of power (i.e., those who are crucified). They are thus critical of the concrete/material societal and ecclesial changes that Hauerwas’ ethic does or does not promote. Is Hauerwas’ ethic informed by the experiences of those people and other earth creatures with the most at stake? Does his interpretation of ecclesiology as ethics

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\(^{306}\) Ibid (emphasis added).

\(^{307}\) De La Torre, “Stanley Hauerwas on Church,” 223.
recognize social, political, and economic forms of violence and incorporate a critical analysis of power? De La Torre offers a normative claim for an adequate Christian ethics when he states:

Although it is noble to envision how character ought to be seen and intended, and how said character might bring about change, [i.e. character formation and conduct are not necessarily separate in Hauerwas’ ecclesiology] it is only through praxis geared at dismantling the power and privilege bestowed upon Euroamericans and their churches that character develops. For what good is virtuous character if oppressive structures remain? 

In other words, if ecclesiology is about embodied liberatory praxis and is critical of privilege and power within the church, it could potentially function in life-giving ways – living into and embodying the kingdom of God presently.

Gloria Albrecht also states that an adequate ecclesial ethics requires deconstructing the power dynamics of the community of character and how it shapes the behaviour of its members. A greater emphasis on the ongoing outcomes and effect of ecclesial praxis are necessary and related to character formation. Anabaptist martyrs are examples of how specific action is connected to being formed in the character of Christ. The challenge is to find and value the stories of those who experience unjust suffering, marginalization, and oppression. These experiences of faith can serve as sources for Christian ethics if they do not glorify suffering. Unlike the suffering of Anabaptist martyrs, suffering that is destructive to the human spirit and resistant to being understood as deserved (what I have been referring to as “unjust suffering” or what Wendy Farley calls “radical suffering”\(^\text{309}\)) must be carefully interpreted. Experiences of unjust suffering do not promote Christ-like salvific suffering, rather they reveal the need for societal, ecclesial, and theological change as they witness to God’s presence with those who suffer unjustly. These experiences are fuel for working toward peace, not lifting up suffering. They are tragic. “Tragedy,” Marcia Mount Shoop states, “unlike traditional theodicies, does not try to justify suffering. Instead it acknowledges the reality of suffering and the understanding that some suffering is irredeemable and unjustified.”\(^\text{310}\) In this way, character formation and action are integrally related. Again, the key question is whose character and whose action shape

\(^{308}\) Ibid., 220.
ecclesiology as ethics? The contextual nature of theology and ethics must be acknowledged and weighed according to relationships of power since, as critical theologies recognize, “no theoretical [or theological] construct is ever value neutral” and therefore “must be tested for [their] liberative effects.”

Ecclesiology as Sexual Ethics in the Life of the Mennonite Church

In order to examine the ways in which sources and norms are put together and applied by Mennonite communities in the lived practice of ecclesiology as ethics, as well as to identify how they are experienced by the most vulnerable in these communities, I turn to three examples from MC USA and MC Canada.

Case Study: Eastern Mennonite University

A concrete example of why inattention to imbalances of power in roles, rules, and relations makes attempts at reconciliation not only impossible, but even dangerous is the case of MC USA and Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). It concerns the inquiry into stalking and sexual abuse allegations against Luke Hartman, then Vice President of Enrolment at EMU, by student Lauren Shifflett. On April 12, 2016 in a post on the Our Stories Untold Blog, Lauren Shifflett bravely shared her story of abuse, stalking, and death threats by Luke Hartman that she had endured over the course of their sexual relationship, which lasted over a year, and steadily became more

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311 Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon, “Introduction,” Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity, ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon (Ottawa, ON: Novalis, 2004), 189. As Schweitzer and Simon articulate, “[t]he term ‘critical theology’ refers to politically engaged theologies that articulate the liberating effects of the biblical narratives of eschatological hope on the basis of dialogue with critical social theories” (9). Critical theologies are also contextual. My own work is an example of a critical theology located at the intersection of Mennonite and feminist theo-ethics.

312 The Our Stories Untold Blog is part of the Our Stories Untold (OSU) website, which is organized by and represents “an independent network of people who have suffered sexualized violence, people who love people who have suffered sexualized violence, and people who are just plain fed up with the harm that sexualized violence does in our communities and around the world.” The network claims to be “people who are concerned, specifically, about the spiritual dimensions of sexualized violence and the presence of sexualized violence in communities of faith” – many of whom are connected to the Mennonite church in North America in some way. Hilary J. Scarsella is Director of OSU’s operations and Barbara Graber is the Editor of the OSU website. (“About Our Stories Untold,” Our Stories Untold [2012] http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/about/ [accessed September 12, 2016].)
threatening over the four years that followed (ending in 2014 when Shifflett came forward to Lindale Mennonite Church with her story). Why did this abuse go unchecked and why was it mishandled? An account of the moral agents and their power relations indicates overlapping uneven relationships of senior staff, Hartman, with student, Shifflett, and also of Shifflett and leaders of her home congregation, Lindale Mennonite Church (LMC). When Shifflett appealed to members of LMC to support her and intervene in her abuse, they did not listen and take her seriously. Instead, Dawn Monger, Associate Pastor at LMC, and Teresa Anders, another Lindale member whom Dawn trusted and heard Shifflet’s story, shared her story with Lead Pastor Duane Yoder, a close friend of Shifflett’s abuser – Hartman. In doing so, they broke Shifflett’s trust and complicated the situation with her abuser. Here are Shifflett’s reflections on her experience of reporting her abuse to her congregation, including her suffering given their response:

The past year and a half have been an eye-opening lesson for me on Church politics; a hard lesson that often left me feeling betrayed and re-victimized. I cannot remain a part of Lindale Mennonite Church in its current state. Lindale is full of incredible people who love and care about each other so profoundly. Our small group from Lindale helped raise me and I’ve known genuine compassion and love from them. They aren’t church, they are family. It is not because of the congregation that I need to detach. Predators, abusers…they swing hard against their victims. Once I’m brave enough to embrace another church again, I expect and deserve leadership that swings back even harder. Secrecy, silence, passivity; those protect the perpetrator, not the victim. I have not been protected, the congregation has not been protected, and the community has not been protected. I (and my story) have been hit back and forth like a ping pong ball between one powerful church leader who wanted to protect Luke, and one powerful (but silenced) church leader who wanted to protect me.

As a result of pressure by Shifflett and her advocates at the Mennonite chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), an independent inquiry was ordered by MC USA into EMU’s handling of the case, but Shifflett was given no role in the process. Instead of including Shifflett in the decision-making process for choosing which independent body would be hired, MC USA, who is overseeing the process, decided that representatives from the three institutions being investigated (EMU, LMC, and Virginia Mennonite Conference [VMC]) made

314 Ibid.
315 Ibid.
the selection themselves.\textsuperscript{316} As Buck states, this is a clear conflict of interest and slight to Shifflett. For this reason, as well as indications that the organization hired (D. Stafford and Associates) is not survivor-focused,\textsuperscript{317} Shifflett has withdrawn her support from the process. Her sister, Marissa Buck writes:

Honestly, Lauren and my distrust has grown since we have been ignored, excluded, and met with silence throughout this process despite our openness to conversation and collaboration. Not one leader from the Mennonite institutions involved in dealing with Hartman’s abuse reached out to Lauren (except for Loren Swartzentruber, former president of EMU, who attempted to secure Lauren’s private cell phone number through one of his employees despite the fact that she requested all communication go through her advocate).\textsuperscript{318}

The Sexual Abuse Prevention Panel formed by MC USA in 2015 to “continue the work of healing and prevention of sexual abuse within the denomination” also terminated its participation in the investigative process. The panel reports:

Following conversations with Lauren this week, after listening to her concerns, we as a panel feel the need to stand with her and other victims and survivors. We have decided to terminate our participation in the investigation at EMU and in the selection of investigators for Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) and Lindale Mennonite Church (LMC). We cannot affirm the process that resulted in the selection of D. Stafford and Associates (DSA) for EMU, or any process that does not involve Lauren.\textsuperscript{319}

The particular persons and institutions that were granted authority in the decision making process for choosing an investigative body, the process itself, and the outcomes of the process did not reflect the norms of justice, love, just-peace, the well-being of women, and fostering of genuine community. Instead, the process continued to do harm as it acted unjustly by denying the moral agency of the survivor and thereby ignoring her voice. It also relegated the conversation to the private sphere – between the parties being investigated – and was highly suspicious of Shifflett’s advocates at SNAP. In her sharing of her story, Shifflett reveals the inherent flaws in processes

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid.
built on notions of mutual accountability, where there is no mutuality as shared power in structures and policies (e.g. Yoder’s interpretation of Matthew 18).

*Case Study: MC USA’s Ecclesial Discernment Process Regarding LGBTQ Inclusion*

Another important example of current ecclesial discernment for faithful action amongst Mennonites in North America is MC USA’s ecclesial discernment process on inclusion of LGBTQ disciples. Stephanie Krehbiel’s ethnographic research on this particular case reveals the pressing challenges of Mennonite ecclesiology for sexual ethics.

In “Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA,” Krehbiel draws on interviews, oral histories, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival evidence from 1976 – 2016 to examine processes of moral reasoning and decision making within MC USA regarding LGBTQ justice. These processes are commonly referred to as “communal discernment.” Here, discernment is understood as “a peaceful approach to settling communal conflict” within a congregation as opposed to a top-down form of decision-making associated with a hierarchal ecclesial structure. This is the ideal. In reality, however, Krehbiel reveals that discernment is rarely experienced as a peaceful and life-giving process for LGBTQ Mennonites.

Krehbiel finds that discernment processes within MC USA regarding LGBTQ inclusion “constitute queer Mennonites as an unsolvable problem . . . In structured conversations, denominational conventions, committee meetings, Sunday school circles, and many other less formal settings, queer people have been discussed; they are a concern; they have been the subjects of dialogue and discernment. They have, on numerous occasions, been asked to share their stories.” Even in circumstances where LGBTQ voices are sought out, “they are often pressed to perform a version of what Lauren Berlant has called the ‘infantile citizen,’ a grown-up child who trusts the system to work. This discursive construct places disproportionate pressure on those who are socially marginalized, demanding that they willfully disregard their own

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320 Stephanie Krehbiel, “Pacifist Battlegrounds,” 27.
knowledge of the workings of power and inequality.’” Krehbiel finds that “Queer Mennonites have fought to be given space to speak in institutional Mennonite settings, but being given space to speak is still a matter of ‘being given’ something, something that is conditional and perhaps just as easily denied.” It is therefore impossible for LGBTQ Mennonites to participate in institutional “dialogue” or “discernment” without implicitly agreeing to its disagreeable terms.

Krehbiel’s work with Mennonite LGBTQ persons reveals that communal discernment is frequently experienced as inhospitable and oppressive by LGBTQ persons. For this to change, Krehbiel argues, discernment processes must develop and embody a feminist theology of power and an understanding of violence as gendered, sexualized, and structural. She claims, “Mennonite institutional discourse is dependent upon a collective theological imaginary in which power created by social privilege and history of inequalities does not exist.” Here Krehbiel underscores the erasure of internally marginalized voices in Mennonite theology and institutional discourse that has been shaped predominantly by a history of persecution and ongoing identity as a “persecuted people.” Claiming the identity of a historically marginalized, pacifist, people alongside a distrust of power and violence understood at the state level prevents Mennonites from talking about power as it pertains to them. Krehbiel writes: “When I looked at Mennonite processes for ‘dealing with’ the conflicts presented by sexual diversity, I saw repeatedly how easy it was for people concerned with peacemaking to convince themselves that once they embraced the appropriate dogma and methodology, they were delivered from the capacity to do violence.”

Pacifist identity understood as refusal of military service and rooted in a history of martyrdom prevents present-day Mennonites from understanding the ways in which they can be simultaneously victims and oppressors and participate in other forms of violence. An understanding of peacemaking as the renunciation of power and the assumption that peacemakers and peace churches can be power-neutral exacerbate the problem. Neutrality is an illusion of equal vulnerability. Understood as such, power is used to maintain the status quo (i.e.

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321 Ibid., 37.
322 Ibid., 38
323 Ibid.
324 Ibid., 35.
325 Ibid., 16.
unequal relations of power). Significantly, “[w]hile powerful Mennonites almost always employ a rhetoric of separation from ‘the world’ to justify their power and manage dissent, their ability to theologically distance themselves from power primes them to accept and reproduce patterns of social inequality much bigger than Mennonites.”

This further accounts for how power operates to the advantage of some at the expense of those kept outside the bounds of respect and authority in the Mennonite church.

Krehbiel’s ethnographic research into the concrete experiences of LGBTQ Mennonites demonstrates the problems of Mennonite discernment practices of moral reasoning, revealing that equality and mutuality in ecclesiology as ethics cannot be assumed and, in fact, do not currently exist between LGBTQ and straight Mennonites in conversations about LGBTQ inclusion. Responding to the inequalities, exclusion, and violence she has witnessed, Krehbiel calls Mennonites to articulate and practice a sexual ethics that attends to issues of power, consent, the public and private nature of sexuality, and, thus be committed and accountable to nonviolence.

Case Study: Matthew 18 as “Loving Dialogue” in MC Canada and MC USA Statements and Processes Regarding Human Sexuality

In practice, a theo-ethical commitment to Matthew 18 has been understood in MC Canada and MC USA conversations about LGBTQ inclusion as a commitment to “loving guidance” or “loving dialogue.” Grievously, however, this language has and continues to be unaccompanied by an analysis of power and thus continues to support oppressive discernment processes for sexual ethics within MC USA and MC Canada, especially what has been labelled “homosexuality.” North American Mennonite discernment processes on the morality of homosexuality frequently reference a commitment to “loving dialogue” as defined in two prior resolutions on human sexuality – Resolution on Human Sexuality (1986) and A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality (1987).

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326 Ibid., 71.
327 Ibid., 138.
The 1986 (General Conference Mennonite Church triennial session) and 1987 (biennial Mennonite Church general assembly in North America) resolutions on human sexuality, emerged out of the *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life* (1985) report mandated in 1980 at the General Conference Triennial Sessions and Mennonite General Assembly (1981). *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life* was not intended to be a position statement, but meant to “help the church reflect on the issues raised, biblical material, and the Christian’s Spirit-guided response” regarding sexuality to develop an understanding of sexuality consistent with the Bible.329

In 1986 the *Resolution on Human Sexuality* (which drew on *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*) was passed. In sum, it affirmed the goodness of sexuality and the body, condemned same-sex marriage, and covenanted its members to remain in loving dialogue with one another on the topic of homosexuality.331 The 1987 *Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality* made similar claims and affirmations about sexuality, the body, marriage, and commitment to loving dialogue.332 In both the 1986 and 1987 resolutions “loving dialogue” provoked discussion and required further clarification with regards to the topic of homosexuality and same-sex marriage.333 In order to resolve the confusion the Mennonite Church’s Council on Faith, Life, and Strategy (CFLS) stressed that,

> the words ‘loving dialogue’ […] should not be construed to mean that the homosexual issue is unresolved or that the position of the church is in question…Rather, ‘loving dialogue’ relates to the area of pastoral care in terms of biblical teaching on the denominational position, care of families and individuals who are touched by this issue, admonitions to those with a homosexual orientation, sponsorship of ministries that are directed toward calling persons out of homosexual practices and restoration in the body of believers, and dialogue that reflects the love of Jesus.334

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330 Ibid., v.
331 General Conference Mennonite Church, *Resolution on Human Sexuality*.
332 General Conference Mennonite Church, *A Call to Affirmation*.
Mennonite polity statements on sexuality and Mennonite scholarly discourse in sexual ethics since then remain committed to various understandings of loving dialogue. For example, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada’s Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality (1998) states that it is committed to “dialogue.” It also reaffirms the Resolution on Human Sexuality, which foreclosures the possibility of dialogue that could lead to changes with regard to MC Canada’s position on the morality of same-sex marriage.\footnote{Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality, July 1998, Stratford, ON, available at: http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Resolution_on_the_Issue_of_Homosexuality_(Conference_of_Mennonites_in_Canada,_1998) (accessed 18 November 2016).} MC Canada’s “Being a Faithful Church” process (2009-2015) maintains a commitment to “loving dialogue” as articulated in the 1986 and 1987 resolutions, albeit without reference to the CFLS’s clarification. The BFC process’s commitment to seeking “the leading of the Spirit in the midst of hermeneutical ferment” is, according to the General Board of MC Canada guided, at least in part, by a willingness among congregants to covenant together to “mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ,” and because “we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and we know that the Holy Spirit can lead us to further truth and to repentance where needed.”\footnote{Mennonite Church Canada, “Being a Faithful Church,” 1:1 (2009) and 2:1 (2010).} In, Sexuality: God’s Gift, Mennonite theologian Willard Krabill states that regarding “the gift and same-sex orientation” our task as Christians is to “continue to work through it together in loving dialogue.”\footnote{Willard S. Krabill, “The Gift and Same-sex Orientation,” Sexuality: God’s Gift, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 150.} However, his understanding of loving dialogue is not entirely consistent with the clarifying resolution of 1987. Krabill does not, for example, approach the topic of homosexuality as closed or resolved. Rather, he claims he is focused primarily on entering into dialogue “with those with whom we disagree” with an openness to potentially being transformed.\footnote{Ibid.} These various interpretations of “loving dialogue” continue to guide discernment processes on sexuality in MC Canada and MC USA.

The difficulty with references to and uses of “loving dialogue” in discernment processes about homosexuality as a moral issue (an assumption that is, itself, problematic) is that they do not pay attention to the power dynamics already part of the conversation. Instead, congregational leaders assume that all participants in the discernment process participate equally and share a level playing field of shared power or neutrality. Yet, this is clearly not the case. For example,
the Resolution on Human Sexuality and Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality are simultaneously committed to loving dialogue and to a heteronormative view of marriage. As stated in the Resolution on Human Sexuality, MC Canada’s position on marriage is that “sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and a woman united in marriage and that violation of this teaching is a sin . . . this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity . . . any violation of the [marital] covenant, including spouse abuse, is sin.”339 Regarding this Resolution Alicia Dueck asserts,

“dialogue” [here] is oriented to first condemn homosexuals as sinners, outside of the community, and then for the rest of the presumably uniform heterosexual community of God to bring them healing. It is a dialogue not premised on real and open discussion on the nature of sex, gender, desire, and sexual practices. Rather, those engaging in sexual practices outside of the monogamous heterosexual marriage norm are framed as sinning alongside those committing spousal abuse.340

The 1998 Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality exhibits the same contradiction. It accepts the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective’s statement on “Marriage, Family, and Singleness” (Art. 19) and reaffirms convictions in the Resolution on Human Sexuality, which state that ethical sexual behaviour is that which takes place between a man and a woman in marriage even while also affirming the importance of ongoing dialogue via “patient discernment” on the topic of homosexuality.341 Given their prior commitment to heterosexual marriage as the context for moral sexual behaviour, the 1986 and 1998 resolutions reveal how loving dialogue functions as a cover for conversations about the “Other” that are not in actual fact open to change and are not governed by particular norms that hold participants accountable to dialogue, especially listening to those most vulnerable as sources of moral reasoning and of action guides. In this way, “loving dialogue” does not acknowledge the privileged position of heterosexual Mennonites in discernment processes on “homosexuality,” nor does it recognize what is at stake for those deemed “Other”. Is a commitment to loving the sinner, but hating the sin, which is essentially what MC Canada’s views of loving dialogue promote, really “loving”? How is love defined?

339 Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Resolution on Human Sexuality.
341 Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality.
I affirm Margaret Farley’s claim that in order for love to be “good” and “just” it must be . . . a true response to the beloved, a genuine union between the one who loves and the one loved, and an accurate and adequate affective affirmation of the beloved. Perhaps the most basic example of this is to be found in our recognition that things are not to be loved as if they were persons, and persons are not to be loved as if they were things. What is wrong with loving a person as a thing is that the person is a person, not a thing.\textsuperscript{342}

By these criteria, “loving dialogue” as “loving the sinner, but hating the sin” is not an example of just-love. Most notably, it is not “an adequate affective affirmation of the beloved” in that the beloved claims a sexual identity other than heterosexual to which this understanding of “loving dialogue” is foreclosed against.

Conclusions

In conjunction with my findings on ecclesiology in the work of Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas, I claim that their particular articulations of ecclesiology as ethics as an approach to Christian discipleship ethics is not, as is, liberative for all persons, neither in theory nor in practice. The importance of confession of Jesus as Lord for Christians is a defining feature of Mennonite ecclesial ethics and has the potential to inform a nonviolent, ecclesial, embodied approach to sexual ethics. This question needs to be invoked in tandem: “What difference does confession of Jesus as Lord make for our ethics as disciples of Christ and sexual beings?” In response, greater attention needs to be paid to whose particular experiences shape sexual ethics and which norms govern both character formation and moral action (which cannot be mutually exclusive – since character is also formed by moral action). The tools thus far for a feminist liberationist theological (and ecclesial) ethics include: 1) a theory of how power operates in interpersonal, systemic, and ecclesial relations; 2) attention to people’s lived experiences of violence (in all its forms), including those of women and queer persons; 3) similarly, engagement with those typically considered “Other” within the community because Christian theo-ethics rooted in the example of Christ are formed in conversation with people who find themselves at the margins of the church and of wider society; 4) a commitment to justice, peace, and love as norms for

\textsuperscript{342} Farley, \textit{Just-Love}, 198.
ecclesiology as ethics; and, 5) a connection between the so-called public and private spheres (i.e. an understanding of how personal and social pains are linked to the wider dynamics of social systems).

To reiterate, I am proposing a critically constructive understanding of the dominant articulation and practice of what in scholarship is known as “ecclesiology as ethics”. I continue to view the Mennonite emphasis on the community of faith as a particular community whose being and doing are transformed by and responsible to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for daily moral living. Additionally, however, I argue that this community of faith must be aware of the ways in which it is historically and socially located (i.e. shaped by ongoing shifting relations of systemic power). Hauerwas’ understanding that “the church does not have social ethic; the church is a social ethic” is true, but not at all simple. Because this story-formed community does not exist apart from history or devoid of relations of power, there must be norms to guide ethical discernment and accountability processes. Recognizing that relations of domination and subordination exist within the church, it is particularly important to practice a commitment to relationships of shared power that model justice, love, and peace. Significantly, and unlike Yoder, Hauerwas, and Huebner’s understanding of ecclesiology as ethics, this approach does not function as a cover for relationships of unequal power under the guise of claiming equality within the community of faith. It is a feminist Mennonite approach to ecclesiology as ethics, which I later articulate as “erotic peacemaking”. The next chapter applies these methodological tools for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics as it looks specifically at the moral significance of Jesus for sexual ethics via an exploration of an embodied view of the incarnation.

343 Harrison, Making the Connections, 245; Davies and Haney, Redefining Sexual Ethics, xi.
Chapter 3: The Normativity of Jesus for a Theo-Ethics of Embodiment and Sexuality

In this chapter I consider how Jesus is normative for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. Because an embodied view of Jesus’ incarnation and discipleship is lacking in contemporary Mennonite discourses on sexuality, particularly in the work of Willard Swartley and Ted Grimsrud, I draw on the work of body theologians for an embodied view of the incarnation as key for Mennonite sexual ethics and develop the moral norm of embodied peace for an adequate ethics. I then describe and analyze three contributions to theological anthropology from Mennonite perspectives in conversation with theological anthropologies that pay particular attention to bodies that suffer unjustly in order to articulate a revised theological anthropology. This theological anthropology privileges the experiences of bodies that suffer unjustly, accepts bodies and right relations as sites of divine revelation and mediums for imaging God to others, and incorporates justice as a criterion for loving relationships for sexual ethics. In these ways it reflects what it means to be created as sexual beings in the image of God and is thus a key basepoint for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality.

Mennonite Discourses on Discipleship and Sexuality

Discipleship and peacemaking rooted in the example of Jesus are central to Mennonite theology and ethics. Harder explains: “The theology of discipleship depends upon a notion of divine

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345 Christian feminist and body theologians I will be turning to here include: Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’”; Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom; Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church; Snarr, Social Selves and Political Reform; and Legge, “Colourful Differences,” “Sex in Public,” and “Wild Geese and Solidarity.”
incarnation or embodiment in history that continues beyond the historical event of Jesus. The present authority of God is mediated by the embodiment of God’s activity in a human text, a human community, and a human discernment process.”

Given that Mennonite understandings of discipleship are rooted in “being” and “doing” (i.e., an ethics of lived and living faith) and understandings of peacemaking rooted in nonviolence, it is ironic that scholars writing out of a Mennonite theological and ecclesial framework have yet to discern what embodied peace and discipleship look like with regards to sexuality and the body, which are locations of significant hurt and violence for many.

Very few Mennonite theologians who discuss sexuality within the polity and practices of MC Canada and/or MC USA incorporate an embodied view of the incarnation. In *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, Willard Swartley looks to the example of Jesus as a source for sexual ethics. However, based on his interpretation of scripture, which avoids any discussion of the Word made flesh and citing Walter Moberly’s work, he concludes that Jesus’ sexuality is insignificant because Jesus lived fully without sexual intercourse. Here Swartley seems to equate sexuality with heterosexual intercourse and assumes its irrelevance for discipleship. Because he assumes Jesus was asexual, sexuality and its embodied expression are not important means of experiencing God and imaging God to others.

While Jesus functions as a central ethical figure for sexual ethics, Swartley’s limited view of sexuality as sexual intercourse ignores Jesus’ self-understanding and way of being in the world, for example, as a rabbi and Jewish son – including his experience of the emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual need for intimate communion with human and divine. It thus leads Swartley to ignore the implications of an embodied view of the incarnation for sexual ethics. This has serious ramifications for his conclusions about sexual ethics. In his work on homosexuality as a moral issue, for example, Swartley’s claim that sexuality is not integral to personhood prevents him from finding any fault in prescribing celibacy for gay people within an understanding of homosexuality as sinful.

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346 Harder, *Obedience*, 37.
Ted Grimsrud takes a different stance. He claims that the radical openness that Jesus demonstrates in his ministry is normative for a “theology of welcome,” which invites all peoples, regardless of sexual orientation, to the body of Christ.\(^{350}\) In particular, he claims that Jesus’ life and teachings on radical openness, table fellowship, and the significance of the love feast offer wisdom that supports the inclusion of sexual minorities in the church.\(^{351}\) Table fellowship, for example, demonstrated Jesus’ radical openness as he ate with those typically considered “outsiders.” It “signified welcome into the kingdom of God” and carries a message of love and compassion; a message of inclusion as opposed to exclusion. This, Grimsrud argues, is a starting point for conversations about how Jesus’ disciples are called to address the issue of LGBTQ inclusion – the “Other” in their midst.\(^{352}\) While I affirm Grimsrud’s emphasis on Jesus as a moral exemplar of openness to the “Other” since building relationships of love and justice with those on the margins of society is a central feature of Jesus’ ministry, I would have liked to have seen Grimsrud directly name the importance of keeping body and soul together for sexual ethics as rooted in Jesus’ own embodied existence as a human being. By failing to do so, I am concerned that Grimsrud’s theology of welcome does not go far enough in deconstructing a spirituality/sexuality dualism.

In sum, Swartley and Grimsrud do not consider an embodied view of the incarnation for sexual ethics and, therefore, overlook the significance of embodied peacemaking and discipleship – including the importance of transcending hierarchical dualisms – for sexuality and the body. If peacemaking and discipleship are foundational concepts for Mennonite theo-ethics, then it is difficult to name their work on sexual ethics as decidedly “Mennonite” or as appropriate resources for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexual ethics.

Additional examples of Mennonite perspectives on sexuality do not fare much better. Carole Hull recalls Mennonite perspectives on gender and sexuality at AMBS in the 70’s and John Howard Yoder’s abuses: “Mennonites were then, and still are, caught up in a mind/body


\(^{352}\) Grimsrud, “Toward a Theology of Welcome,” 142; Grimsrud, “What did Jesus do?” 52.
dualism which means that they were set up for abuse . . . In retrospect, John took freedom in that context, to abuse vulnerable people. He had a whole landscape to work in.”

Goossen articulates:

In the 1970s, as Yoder drew women into his confidential project, he targeted primarily Mennonite women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Many had grown up in families and religious contexts in which women were expected to set boundaries for sexual behavior. Embedded in this cultural tradition, which both predated and countered the sexual revolution, the trope of woman as temptress, some would argue, “set up women to distrust their own perceptions.”

The trope of woman as temptress is premised on a negative view of the body and the assumption that women are more closely connected to the body compared to men. In a dualistic view of mind and body, male and female, spirituality and sexuality, women’s bodies are considered to be the likely cause of men’s sexual immorality. Women are thus tasked with the responsibility of policing both their own morality as well as the morality of men (within a heteronormative view of sexuality). These dualisms also generate suspicion around the possibility of bodies, in particular women’s bodies, as potential sites of Divine wisdom. In the Yoder case, this suspicion of women’s embodied experiences/knowledge led Mennonite institutional leadership to dismiss victim-survivor’s allegations of abuse, which enabled Yoder’s abuse of additional women. In other words, women’s erotic power, which Audre Lorde defines as that power that rises within women from their “deepest and non-rational knowledge,” was feared, vilified, and demeaned. As I explain later, I claim women’s erotic power as a key source, as well as liberating eros, which qualifies eros as desire for intimate relationships of equality and mutual respect, compared to, for example, relationships of domination and subordination, as a key norm for the sexual ethics I propose.

The suspicion of women’s embodied experiences of abuse in the Yoder case illustrates one of the ways in which Mennonite understandings of sexuality and the body have been and continue to be influenced by the hierarchical dualistic anthropologies of Stoic philosophy and Gnostic religions, which are suspicious of bodily passion and viewed women as inferior to men –

354 Goossen, “Mennonite Bodies,” 250.
despite evidence to the contrary. By adopting this suspicion and hierarchical view of mind over body, spirituality over sexuality, and then associating particular bodies with the body and sexuality more so than others, Mennonites have opened the door for using sexual practices as a means of devaluing and demonizing human beings.

Kelly Brown Douglas reveals how this is the case with regard to Western Christianity, including Mennonites. According to Douglas, Western Christianity has used sexuality to devalue human beings by: 1) making genital sexual activity the defining feature of sexuality, 2) associating sexual activity with passionate, irrational, and satanic behaviour (and subsequently proving that women and people of colour have a higher sex drive and are therefore an affront to God), and 3) by alienating people from their sexuality as a denial of their embodied being via the narrative of spirit over body. 356 Each of these narratives inform the historically dominant Christian attitude toward sexuality that was and continues to be used to justify relationships of domination and subordination, including, for example, in the denial of women’s experiences of sexual abuse in the Yoder case.

To correct this dualistic thinking and work toward a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and healthy sexuality, women’s erotic power must be recognized and affirmed as an embodied source of moral wisdom and energy for social change. Women should be encouraged to name their embodied knowledge of the Holy Spirit and to be self-affirming “in the face of racist, patriarchal, anti-erotic society.” 357 Mind/body, male/female, and spirituality/sexuality hierarchical dualisms must be transcended and the erotic reclaimed as a positive source of power in theo-ethical discourses if abuses like those of Yoder are to be avoided in the future. Indeed, how is a theology of welcome embodied in the sexuality and erotic relationships of disciples of Christ? An adequate body theology, which highlights that Christian scriptures have incarnation and thus embodiment at their heart, considers the implications of the Word made flesh and reclaims the erotic, in other words, women’s experiences as embodied persons (e.g. experiences of puberty, motherhood, race, sexuality, age, ability) as a potential source of life-giving power/the Holy Spirit. I turn now to resources of an embodied view of the incarnation and liberating eros as a theo-ethical norm.

Discipleship and Embodiment

Body theologians explore the theological and moral meanings of body experiences in conjunction with a particular understanding of justice as right relationships in the form of overcoming hierarchical dualisms of domination and oppression. They are valuable resources for developing an adequate Christian sexual ethics. Body theologian James Nelson highlights the centrality of incarnational faith for Christianity and the ways in which it is experienced in the bodiliness of every human being, where Christ is alive and embodied in our common flesh through God’s “healing, saving, liberating, justice-making, ways.”

By reconnecting body, mind, and emotions as valuable sources of God’s revelation, body theology “holds out the hope of healing the cruel rupture that patriarchal thinking [and other forms of distortion] has introduced into theology.” An embodied view of the incarnation flows from Mennonite theology’s emphasis on discipleship and can be developed in dialogue with body theologians in their recognition of varied embodied experiences as significant sources of God’s revelation. An embodied view of incarnation is an integral component of a theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. It also promotes nonviolence by attending to the particular experiences of bodies that suffer unjustly.

There is a tendency for MC USA and MC Canada, as well as Mennonite theologians to be more reactive than proactive with regard to sexual ethics. As scholar Willard Krabill notes,

Especially with regard to sexuality, Mennonites have always been a great deal more reactive than proactive, reacting to the mores and practices of the society in which they lived. The increased activity and study of sexuality since the 1960s, was stimulated more by an increasingly permissive society, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement than by a growing awareness that Mennonites have inadequately understood and addressed the biblical understandings of the sexual dimensions of human personality and life.

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A sexual ethics informed by body theology is proactive. Instead of allowing reactions to the increasing sexualisation of society, for example, to shape the church’s ethics and theology, body theologians incorporate ecclesiology and ask, what does it mean to be the church as embodied community? What does it mean to be disciples of Christ, who is the Word made flesh? An emphasis on community and discipleship for Christian ethics here resonates with the positive aspects of ecclesiology as ethics articulated by Huebner, Yoder, and Hauerwas. Like an understanding of ecclesiology as ethics, body theology offers a welcome correction to individualistic and secular approaches to ethics by relocating ethics in the particularity of discipleship in Christ.

Other commitments in body theology differ from those of the understandings of ecclesiology as ethics critiqued in Chapter 2. For example, body theology incorporates a feminist analysis of power and privileges the embodied knowing of persons whose bodies have been oppressed, excluded, and endured violence. Body theology views the body as a site of divine presence and wisdom in which the Word continues to become flesh. Therefore, embodied experience is a resource for discerning how the church ought to live as a community of sexual persons – one that does not separate sexuality and spirituality, but considers them together within the life of the church. Body theology thus functions as an important corrective to ecclesiological approaches that do not acknowledge that the physical, sexual, particular bodies of individuals are sites of divine presence, that the Christian community is a community of sexual persons, and the implications of these understandings for the lived ethics of the church. As Nelson reiterates:

> Christian faith is an incarnational faith, a faith in the repeatable and continuing incarnation of God. God is uniquely known to us through human presence, and human presence is embodied presence. Thus body language is inescapably the material of Christian theology, and bodies are always sexual bodies, and our sexuality is basic to our capacity to know and experience God.\(^{361}\)

Much of Mennonite theology and theo-ethical discernment processes do not exhibit an embodied view of the incarnation that accepts and affirms all bodies. As Alicia Dueck finds “[i]n the idealized discourses of the Mennonite community, there is a clear rejection of bodies and subjectivities from the community when they fall out of the frame of heterosexuality or gender/sex uniformity. Too often [for example], it is impossible for the transgender individual to

be Mennonite and even, in fact, exist in the consciousness of the community.” An embodied view of the incarnation is missing. Furthermore, an underdeveloped view exists among cisgendered Mennonites of sexuality and gender as biological rather than socially constructed. Without an understanding of sexuality and gender as social constructions, cisgendered Mennonites are likely to uphold a dualistic view of gender as male and female and connect gender to sexuality – making them unaware of the possibility of transgendered persons and therefore less welcoming toward them.

At the same time, there are also exceptions. For example, diversity, not sameness, is expressed in the lived experiences of Mennonites within the community of faith. Again according to Dueck, “looking at the stories of Mennonites, it is possible to see people living differently and in ways that deviate from the norm (e.g. Mennonite women and LGBTQ people).” Mennonite women “have consistently lived in ways which contended with or deviated from the familial, institutional and theological discourses which prescribe certain behaviours and reject others.” That deviant bodies, genders, and sexual identities exist in some Mennonite churches reveals a certain degree of acceptance among some Mennonites of identities that differ from the institutional and theological parameters of what it means to be Mennonite as being white, heterosexual, and conforming to traditional gender norms.

Jesus was fully human. In today’s context, this includes the affirmation to be sexual. To be sexual as humans is to be created for relationship; “to experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual need for intimate communion with human and divine.” If a person is not allowed to live a fully embodied existence as a sexual being, then their intimate relationships with both humans and the Divine suffer greatly. As Kelly Brown Douglas states, if the body is “the physicality of sexuality, that which signals potential for one to be authentically human and reflect the image of God” then “to separate someone from their [body via their sexuality] is to separate them from God, which is to sin.” The focus of Christian sexual ethics, therefore,

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363 Ibid.
364 Ibid.
365 Ibid.
368 Ibid., 123.
ought to be on discerning how to live in right relationship with one another and with God as sexual beings, rather than sexual acts in particular. For, to talk about sex in terms of acts is to separate our bodies from ourselves and thereby reinstate a spirituality/sexuality dualism, which leads to the oppression of those associated with the bodily half of the body-soul dualism. All bodies, not simply heterosexual bodies or procreative bodies for example, ought to be welcomed into the body of Christ – the church.

Liberating Eros as a Theo-ethical Norm

I claim “liberating eros” as a theo-ethical norm for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. The word “liberating” qualifies eros as desire for intimate relationships of equality and mutual respect, compared to, for example, relationships of domination and subordination. Liberating eros associates body pleasure with justice and finds justice arousing.

Liberating eros is noticeably absent within patriarchal systems and theologies. Within these systems, dominant and subordinate power relations are eroticised. As Marvin Ellison articulates, sexism, white supremacy, and ableism in our society (and in our theo-ethics), reinforce a link between eroticism and injustice; “[p]eople internalize in their bodies, not simply in their psyches, the belief that injustice feels good and safe.” Or as Harrison writes: “The tragedy of our so called sexual morality is that mutual respect and eroticism are utterly separated in the lives of most people . . . Many seem to confuse erotic feeling with feelings of control, finding violence ‘more exciting’ than mutual erotic expression.” In light of this, Ellison argues: “Considerable effort will be needed to unlearn our embodied social alienation

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370 Mary Hobgood claims that an example of patriarchy’s eroticism is capitalist eroticism, which eroticizes ownership and relationships of power over (“Coming to Our Senses: Erotic and Economic Discipleship,” *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice Love*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003], 335-336.)
372 Ibid., 246.
and conversely, to appropriate a desire, at a sufficiently deep level, for social relations that are respectful of all people.”

Christian ethics invites people to unlearn erotic desire for power as control and teaches the value of mutual vulnerability, which includes claiming one’s agency. Erotic power itself is not the problem, but, rather, its misuses.

Ellison takes up the dual task of unlearning erotic desire for power as control and teaching mutual vulnerability by articulating what he calls “ethical eroticism” – or what I am calling “liberating eros.” According to Ellison, the guiding principles of ethical eroticism are to honour the following: 1) the goodness of the body, 2) bodily integrity, (i.e. respect the integrity of your partner’s body, and by extension, your partner’s self) 3) mutuality (i.e. affirming that good sex requires consent), and 4) fidelity, which is dependent on mutual openness and honesty. For Ellison, ethical eroticism eroticizes justice. In this way, it is justice as right relation not marriage or heterosexuality that is morally normative for sexual ethics.

Liberating or ethical eros is a necessary theo-ethical norm for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. Ellison’s description of erotic justice and guiding principles for ethical eroticism reveal that ethical eros embodies nonviolence. Ellison writes: “An ethic of erotic justice . . . rules out relations in which persons are abused, exploited, and violated.” In this way, erotic justice raises expectations of mutual well-being. It seeks justice and nonviolence in intimate relationships and connects personal pain to larger systemic patterns of injustice. For Ellison, fear of erotic power undergirds sexualized oppression against women and LGBTQ persons and personal relationships of domination and subordination are supported by larger narratives of power as control within North American society. Rather than viewing sexuality with fear and suspicion, Ellison encourages Christians to direct negativity toward injustice and to value moral knowing rooted in embodied feeling. To reiterate, sexuality and eros are not moral issues. The moral issues concern their expression. Liberating eros qualifies the nature of nonviolence as being sex-positive and overcoming hierarchical dualisms. In doing so, it values

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374 Ellison, “Reimagining Good Sex,” 246.
375 The two concepts, “ethical eroticism” and “liberating eros” are essentially the same. I prefer the term “liberating” since it describes, at the outset, eros as that which liberates all from oppressive intimate relationships of power-over by, instead, desiring intimate, pleasurable, relationships of shared power and mutuality.
377 Ibid., 256.
378 Ibid., 258.
embodied, self-reflective experience as a source for ethics and better connects people to causes of joy and suffering – including their own.\textsuperscript{379}

Body theology’s emphasis on embodied incarnation also affirms liberating eros as a theological norm. It does so by naming the value of both erotic and agapeic love. Agape is commonly considered the highest form of love in the Christian tradition representing God’s generous love for humanity, to be reciprocated and shared by the church. For example, Mennonites have “separated sexual experience from encounter with the divine. Agape, not eros, is the ideal.”\textsuperscript{380} This is a narrow view that overlooks the significance of erotic love in the Bible as an attribute of God, particularly God in human form. Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer rightly argues that eros and agape are not dualistic since, “human eros finds its origin in divine eros, the desire [of and] for God, who is ultimate ground of our whole existence.”\textsuperscript{381}

Taking Reimer’s point one step further, I argue that Jesus embodied erotic power and exemplifies eros as a desire for respect in all relationships, including between humans, communities, and with creation, in the form of mutuality and liberation from oppression and all that separates us (i.e. sin) from the love of God, self, neighbour, and creation. While the Greek word eros is not used in the New Testament to refer to love, I concur with Pamela Dickey Young in seeing the value of using eros as an English word that captures the spirit of love and embodiment attested in the biblical witness.\textsuperscript{382} Additionally, because the New Testament use of agape has commonly been interpreted as self-sacrificial, rather than reciprocal, love, using the term eros helps to highlight “elements of love that have traditionally been neglected in theological discussion.”\textsuperscript{383} Young reiterates that in the gospels Jesus loves and is loved in return. She assigns this mutual love to her understanding of erotic love.

Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart offer examples of the ways in which Jesus’ ministry was both embodied and erotic. They write: “Healings, eating, and drinking were at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. He addressed people in their totality (not merely in their souls as later

\textsuperscript{379} Ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{381} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{382} Pamela Dickey Young, \textit{Re-creating the Church}, 31.
\textsuperscript{383} Ibid.
Christianity would have it), and salvation encompassed the totality of human experience, at the heart of which was the body. And not only individual bodies but the body of a society [i.e., social relations are embodied]. The story of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:24-34) is an important example of the role of the body in salvation – it is in her act of physically touching Jesus that God’s power works and she is healed in response and thus embodies a relationship. Salvation, therefore, in Christic terms, is both embodied and relational. In his life, death, and resurrection Jesus demonstrates an intense desire for relationship with both humans and the divine. In this way, a view of the incarnation that takes embodiment seriously (as flesh, bones, and blood) leads to the appreciation of both eros and agape as means of imaging God in ourselves and in community, witnessing to others and spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God.

An embodied view of the incarnation informs a sexual ethics rooted in the normativity of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection and in seeking the well-being of women and those whose bodies have been negatively impacted by a hierarchical dualism of spirituality and sexuality/mind and body. Embodiment acknowledges the Spirit’s presence in our very being as “embodied spirits” and “inspired bodies.” The fact that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth matters for sexual ethics – particularly if one adopts a broad understanding of sexuality as encompassing “who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion – human and divine.” As a human, that is to say embodied and sexual, God in Jesus shows how disciples are called to live in embodied and intimate relationships. An embodied sexual ethics rooted in God’s incarnation in Jesus is relational and attends to relationships of power. It transcends dualisms, affirms the goodness of each person’s sexuality, and views sexuality as a means of sharing the image of God with others. It encourages women, for example, to be in touch with their erotic, embodied experience as sources of wisdom and power for broader ecclesial and social change to be weighed in community and in conjunction with scripture using the norms of love, peace, and justice. It also

385 Ibid.
reclaims eros as a liberating desire for appropriate intimacy via relationships of shared power and mutuality and therefore liberating eros is a theo-ethical norm.

Critiques of Contemporary Mennonite Theological Anthropologies

Norman Kraus, Thomas Finger, and James McClendon are three scholars located within Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and ethics who have begun the work of discerning/articulating a contemporary Mennonite theological anthropology. Because a theological anthropology is part of the theological underpinnings of sexual ethics, I survey Kraus, Finger, and McClendon’s theological anthropologies and assess the merits of their contributions using the norms I have articulated for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. Feminist theological anthropologies that embody these norms are my interlocutors for naming and responding to the underdeveloped aspects of contemporary Mennonite theological anthropologies. I conclude this chapter by constructing a revised theological anthropology from a feminist, peace-oriented, discipleship perspective for a theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality.

Norman Kraus articulates an understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God for sexual ethics. In On Being Human, looking at Genesis 1 and 2, he argues that the use of the plural “in the image of God, God created them . . . points to a sexual reality beyond that of the individual genetic karyotypes to a relational image.” In other words, “the essential moral-personal character and significance of the erotic physical relation (sex) is conditioned by its personal spiritual character and not by its gender complementarity.” Sexual orientation, particularly its self-defining longing for relationship with others, is what it means to be created in the image of God who is relational as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Thus, the guidelines for moral, life-giving, sexual behaviour of any sort are the same for all persons, namely – that all would embody covenanted, monogamous, and consensual relationships. Kraus’s theological anthropology produces an understanding of morality linked to good character in which the image of God is reflected in relationships, rather than particular sexual acts.

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389 Ibid., 56.
390 Ibid., 4 & 79.
In *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Thomas Finger provides a theological anthropology for contemporary Anabaptist theology in relation to the body, soul, and will. Regarding the body, Finger asks, “Do all human thoughts and actions spring from physical [i.e. not embodiment which has thicker connotations] processes? If not, what is the character of those activities and aspirations which transcend them?” In response he explores biblical language related to human nature. Finger notes that the biblical writers often use a number of terms to refer to the *whole person*, rather than multiple words to refer to each of the individual parts of the body that, together, make it whole. For example, in Psalm 84:2 the soul, heart, and flesh are not distinguishable components. There is an emphasis on bodies as similar and united rather than different and apart. In this way, Old Testament writers place us in solidarity with others. In the New Testament, Finger notes that Paul’s teaching on the body differentiates between *sарx* (flesh), which is equated with “human frailty and the passions as negative powers that bind people to patterns of living that oppose God,” and *soma* (body), which is equated with the church as the body of Christ (in which there is unity between believers and the Head, Jesus Christ). Given these findings, Finger concludes that a distinct mind-body dualism is non-existent in scripture. Instead, the body is usually equated with the self. Although the soul or spirit is understood as transcendent in the New Testament, it is also understood as residing in the heart (*kardia*), which is the true centre of the person. Thinking and feeling both take place in the heart. Thus, regarding the purposes of Christian ethics, Finger claims it is impossible to argue effectively that reason is humankind’s exclusive guiding faculty or that body and spirit exist separate from one another.

In *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, McClendon explores an embodied approach to ethics that maintains an Anabaptist attention to scripture and Jesus as a central moral guide as God’s son. McClendon affirms the body as integral for Christian ethics and, in doing so, explores the morality of the body, embodied virtues, and the meaning of eros as part of a Christian ethic of

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392 Ibid., 116.
393 Ibid., 119.
394 Ibid., 118.
395 Ibid., 120.
396 Ibid., 125.
397 Ibid.
398 Ibid., 126.
sexual love. He begins by drawing on Black theology as an example of embodied religion in community. He highlights the following themes in Black theology: 1) the gospel as narrative, 2) use of scripture, 3) an emphasis on community, 4) liberation, and 5) an emphasis on wholeness and interrelatedness.\textsuperscript{399} The remainder of McClendon’s section on body ethics draws on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and emphasizes the importance of embodied virtues for developing a morality of the body.\textsuperscript{400} Finally, in a section devoted to erotic love, he deconstructs the romantic tradition’s anti-physical view of sexual love and eros,\textsuperscript{401} and reinstates eros using Freud\textsuperscript{402} and what he claims to be a Radical Reformer’s perspective.\textsuperscript{403}

Kraus, Finger, and McClendon make valuable contributions to a contemporary Mennonite theological anthropology for a sexual ethics that is life-giving for all. Kraus articulates a relational understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God. Finger transcends a mind-body dualism via an exploration of terms used in scripture to refer to a person/body. McClendon seeks an embodied approach to Christian ethics that reinstates the value of eros for Christian sexual ethics. All three affirm the created goodness of the body and its value for Christian ethics. Yet, certain aspects of Kraus, Finger, and McClendon’s theological anthropologies, however, remain underdeveloped in the task of developing Mennonite theological anthropology and sexual ethics that is life-giving for all. Using notions of eros, sin and grace, and social discourse, I now discuss their work for this purpose.

\textit{Eros}

McClendon’s understanding of eros does not include an understanding of liberating eros, namely that which pays particular attention to the embodied experiences of different persons, in particular women and those typically associated with the castigated body of a mind over body dualism. Instead, he focuses primarily on a Freudian understanding of sexual love and sexual desire between individuals, as well as Christ’s example of love as “the opening of selves to one

\begin{itemize}
\item [400] Ibid., 89 – 90 & 104-105.
\item [401] Ibid., 132-138.
\item [402] Ibid., 143.
\item [403] Ibid., 148-153.
\end{itemize}
another and to themselves as a sign of their opening to God. These understandings of eros are informative and have potential to be life-giving for all – particularly Christ’s example of love as opening to one another (presumably in mutuality). Yet in order to realize the full potential of eros as a theo-ethical norm and for it to be liberating, the impacts of patriarchal eroticism must be named in order for women’s experiences of liberating eros to be sought out and encouraged.

What does love as the opening of selves in relation look like in practice? Does it mean relationships of shared power? What are the implications for particular bodies – most notably those that have suffered the most severe implications of sexual relations as dominant and subordinate relationships of power? These questions, as well as an understanding of the relationship between personal desire and patriarchal societal narratives of desire that link desire to relationships of domination and subordination and control (e.g. the eroticization of male gender supremacy, which “allows many men to believe that coercing an intimate partner, whether male or female, feels good”) are necessary considerations for a theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality that is committed to the well-being of all via feminist Mennonite nonviolence.

Sin and Grace

Kraus, Finger, and McClendon’s contributions indicate a second underdeveloped area of current Mennonite theological anthropologies, namely an account of sin and grace. Why have none of these scholars given a detailed account of sin and grace? McClendon claims that while much has been made of the concepts of the fall and original sin by social theologians from Augustine of Hippo to Reinhold Niebuhr, these concepts are overly pessimistic about human nature and “[make] little room for the life of redeemed discipleship celebrated in the New Testament.” He prefers, instead, John Howard Yoder’s articulation of a common Mennonite stance based on the New Testament principalities and powers, which accounts for both the fallenness of the world and also names the possibility of redemption and optimism regarding human nature given

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404 Ibid., 151.
405 Ellison, “Reimagining Good Sex,” 245.
406 McClendon, Ethics, 161.
Christ’s defeat of the powers in his death and resurrection. As Burkholder states, “Anabaptist/Mennonites have refused to make much of the doctrine of creation, which, when delineated as natural law or evolution, construes power as an essential element of biological and [hegemonic] social order.”

So what is the problem with this approach? According to Burkholder, “[because] Anabaptists have refused to apply natural law categories to their own communities…they have failed to reflect on power as an inexorable condition of finite existence.” Similarly, Berry argues that Mennonite theology’s idealized views of the church’s political mission, which does not include an adequate account of sin, leads it to ignore relationships of power within the church. As a result, Mennonites are unlikely to view themselves as responsible participants in relationships of power, but rather, powerless. As a corrective, Berry adopts Niebuhr’s articulation of human sinfulness as our broken relationship to God. Niebuhr finds that this broken relationship has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical dimension of human sinfulness is unbelief resulting in pride and idolatry. The horizontal dimension is injustice – feeding the powerful instead of the poor. To be created “in the image of God” is to be created for right relationship with God and right relationships with self and others (i.e. for social responsibility and justice-making). In this way, faith becomes a pursuit of justice. For Burkholder and Berry, an understanding of sin and grace must be incorporated into a contemporary Mennonite theological anthropology in order to account for relationships and operations of power.

I agree with Burkholder and Berry that an account of sin as injustice must be an essential part of a theological anthropology. This pertains to my case for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality where injustice names sin as constructed and passed on through the social order where women experience patriarchal, racist, heterosexist abuses of power. That is, abuses of power that live on through social structures including the ecclesia are sinful.

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407 Ibid.
409 Ibid.
410 Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace,’” 132-133.
411 Ibid., 133.
Understanding the relationship between discourses of power and sexuality is particularly important for conversations about ethics. Michel Foucault’s work is influential in this regard. Foucault claims that discourses of power shape our perceptions of sexuality and particular persons’ bodies. If power is relational, then power can be exerted over people through the careful negotiation of their bodies, perceptions, and reproductive capacities. In other words, it is possible to manipulate how a person views their sexuality through discourse. Furthermore, “sex” and “sexuality” are social, historical, constructs. Therefore, to understand sexual desire, Foucault claims, it is necessary to first understand power, then sexuality, and then sex – all within a particular historical context.\footnote{Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality}, 72.}

Sexual discourses are used as tools for the maintenance of hegemonic power. They are “a mechanism by which to make distinctions between people and to increase one’s own claims of superiority” because if a person’s sexuality is improper, “they as a people can be inferior because sexuality gets at a person’s very humanity.”\footnote{Douglas, \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church}, 23.} For example, Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrates the impact of sexual discourse as a mechanism used to control the sexuality of Black Americans. She writes, “[w]hen one understands the role of sexuality in White peoples’ maintenance of power, one can understand the significance of Black sexuality to White culture.”\footnote{Ibid.} The violation of Black sexuality is basic to White culture because “critical to White culture’s existence is its ability to avow White superiority by asserting – seemingly ‘by any means necessary’ – the inferiority of non-White peoples.” Douglas also notes, “as Foucault argues, there is no better way to impugn character and the humanity of a people than by maligning their sexuality.”\footnote{Ibid.} Hence the necessity of framing sexual ethics in terms of moral analysis of what is at stake and for whom.

Influential civil rights activist and theologian Rosemarie Freeney Harding also writes about the discourses used to control Black bodies in America over the course of her life (1930 – 2004). A personal experience from the 1970s in which her own perception of Black bodies, namely her positive perception of her cousin Juanita’s beauty as a dark-skinned Black woman,
and White society’s perceptions of Black women stands out for Harding because of the juxtaposition between the two. She recalls:

About ten years after I left Chicago and moved south with my husband, Juanita died. It was a horrible blow for Aunt Hettie. Juanita was her heart. There was an issue of a major national newsmagazine during that time that featured a beautiful, dark-skinned Black woman on the cover. The Freedom movement was making real strides and demands on the conscience of the country and the article asked people what they saw when they looked at this face. For me, the woman on the cover looked like Juanita. I saw my cousin’s qualities of spirit as well as her physical charm in the model. I bought the magazine and turned to the essay, and as I read the responses of white people who must have been asked what they saw in the face, I was startled. Some said the woman looked angry; others said she looked willful and intransigent. I was amazed. And I said to myself, “They do not know anyone who looks like this, neither are they truly seeing this face.” Because if they had met and known someone like my cousin Juanita, their notions of what blackness is and what it has the potential to become would be so different from the answers they gave.416

Harding depicts her encounter with a racist discourse that debases Black women’s bodies as a form of social control within a racist society. In doing so, she reveals the connection between control of the body and control of the mind. As Christian ethicist Margaret Farley declares, the negotiation of bodies is always also the negotiation of persons.417 In other words, an understanding of sexuality as that which is socially constructed in historical contextual relationships of power goes hand in hand with an understanding of mind, body and spirit as integrally connected. Humans are “embodied spirits” and “inspired bodies.” Therefore, “. . . our bodies and our spirits are one – distinguishable as aspects of our personhood, but in a unified way that they are neither mere parts of one whole nor reducible one to the other.”418 According to Farley, what is at stake here is the notion that “. . . some human suffering is imposed by us on one another not just by and in our bodies, not just by and in our souls, but by and in ourselves as embodied spirits and inspired bodies.”419 Harding, for example, saw how a discourse regarding Black women’s bodies was also an attempt to control and even destroy their spirits and minds. Recognizing this, she resists the racist discourse that deemed Black women’s bodies to be lesser than white women’s bodies. Harding, in her inspired body and embodied spirit, knew this

416 Harding, Remnants, 69.
417 Farley, Just Love, 117.
418 Ibid.
419 Ibid., 118.
discourse was not true and, in resisting it, proclaimed a narrative of Black women’s bodies as beautiful.

As much as Mennonites aim to be countercultural in their discipleship ethics as people committed to nonviolence, they too have been impacted by the harmful sexual discourses of the wider Christian tradition. As previously noted, Dueck, informed by Judith Butler’s work on identity and performativity, reveals how idealized discourses around gender and sexuality among Mennonites question and fail to acknowledge the subjectivity and membership of LGBTQ Mennonites in the Mennonite community. The underlying issue here is the use and abuse of ecclesial power. LGBTQ Mennonites have decreased access to power in the Mennonite community because they occupy gender and sexual perspectives that violate the dominant frames of thinking/discourses there. Yet, this does not render LGBTQ Mennonites and their allies powerless. Dueck explains: “We [i.e. all persons] are always existing in relationships of power and discourses that shape us while we ourselves are shaping, transforming and even rejecting those very pronouncements; and in the telling, we are changed.” Dueck concludes: “[a]lthough there are formalized and idealized pronouncements of what it means to be Mennonite, through daily practices LGBTQ Mennonites are interacting with some of these norms.” This is moral agency from the margins of the church.

By understanding “Mennonite” as a performative identity, it is possible to negotiate identity and to view it in a more inclusive and transformative way. Identity as performance recognizes the ways in which it is never possible to fulfill discursive idealizations. We are all always failing, resisting, and negotiating. Mennonite women have contested their gender roles and still stayed “Mennonite” – the meaning of “Mennonite” has shifted as a result. Therefore, as Dueck aptly states: “The Mennonite community needs to recognize the inevitability of performativity and celebrate the diversity of possibility it holds. This leads to a post-modern understanding of peace as counting as a person.” In other words, what it means to belong in community is to be a human being, a person. A nonviolent theo-ethics of embodiment and

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420 Dueck, Negotiating Sexual Identities, 79.
421 Ibid., 80.
422 Ibid.
423 Ibid., 173.
sexuality will thus include an understanding of peace as valuing each person’s personhood, which includes their sexuality.

**Social Discourse**

A third underdeveloped area of contemporary Mennonite theological anthropologies as demonstrated in the work of Kraus, Finger, and McClendon, is consideration of the relationship between the social body and the physical body. How do the social categories of race, gender, age, ability, class, religion, nation, and sexual orientation inform their approaches and are they aware of it? Whose particular bodies form the prism through which theological anthropologies are discerned? What is the social character of the erotic physical relations that McClendon describes? These questions remain unanswered by Kraus, Finger, and McClendon, but reflect key concerns within feminist and womanist theological anthropologies.

Feminist and womanist theological anthropologies claim that “any appeal to the empirical or visual in the effort to understand human being is never innocent, never ahistorical, and never divorced from power.” It is thus important to specify whose bodies in particular shape the theological understanding being discerned. For Shawn Copeland, this means locating her theological anthropology in the experiences of suffering bodies and, more specifically, the bodies of black women who suffer unjustly. In the process, she considers the theological anthropological relation between the social body, which commodifies and exploits black women’s bodies, and the physical body. In “Colourful Differences and Imago Dei,” Marilyn Legge adds that “the insistence on similarities among us – by theological anthropologies which are based on an ahistorical, acultural, disembodied essential humanity – functions to deny actual relations of domination and subordination and serves to perpetuate the invisibility of many people’s lives.” Theological anthropologies must recognize the relationship between the social body and the physical body (specifying “the conditions in which women [for example] can hope to live as centred, rightly related persons” and privilege bodies that suffer unjustly – in

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425 Ibid., 8.
427 Ibid.
all their diversity and with all of their differences – as the particular bodies through which to discern what it means to be created in the image of God.

Because understandings of sexuality and the body are socially constructed and historically situated, theological anthropologies must also recognize that “sexuality” and “gender” are not in and of themselves normative for sexual ethics (i.e., not what it means to be created in the image of God). As Harrison states, “Gender is not so basic a distinction that it is legitimate morally to treat females as a fundamentally different category from males.”428 Furthermore, theological uses of the imago Dei to legitimize male and female genders (i.e. attempts to create a women-affirming theological anthropology) do little to deconstruct the underlying dominant discourse that heterosexual, binary arrangements are normative. Mary McClintock Fulkerson highlights post-structuralism’s potential to destabilize the subject and reveal these hegemonies. She claims that destabilization coupled with Christian stories (rather than explanations) of a God of justice provide the gift, not of a stable foundation, but of constantly dissembling and hearing from, rather than explaining, the Other.429 At the same time, removing sex and gender distinctions from an understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God risks denying God’s immanent presence in humanity’s embodied existence as sexual and gendered people (and its implications for our theology and ethics). Therefore, on the one hand sex and gender differences matter, and on the other, they need to be continuously destabilized for persons to flourish. A theological anthropology that is life-giving for all must generate an understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God – as that which destabilizes gender binaries and hierarchies of identity to ensure that more is done to deconstruct ableist, heterosexist, patriarchal, racist constructions of masculinity located within the imago Dei.

In Sexuality and the Black Church, Kelly Brown Douglas interprets what it means to be created in the imago Dei as entering into loving relationships with others and also affirming the presence of the divine within oneself – including one’s body. For her, sexuality is fundamental to

428 Harrison, Making the Connections, 169.
being *imago Dei* because it urges relationship.\(^{430}\) What a loving relationship looks like is demonstrated by Jesus in his ministry, in which he is partial to justice and solidarity with victims of oppression.\(^{431}\) Douglas’ approach is similar to Kraus’ in its attention to relationships, rather than sex and gender distinctions. However, she pays special attention to Jesus as the example of what it means to be created in the image of God and incorporates an understanding of justice as normative for loving relationships. Like Copeland, Douglas is aware of the ways in which race, embodiment, and relations of power reframe theological anthropology and notions of discipleship. There must be an awareness of systems of oppression, for example Mennonite representations of the status quo, in order to understand what it means to be human in the context of a broken, fallen, world, where violence and inequalities remain.

In sum, Kraus, Finger, and McClendon offer valuable insights for the discernment of a contemporary Mennonite theological anthropology in its ability to be relational, body-positive, and Jesus-centred. At the same time, aspects of their work remain underdeveloped. First, McClendon’s efforts to reinstate the value of eros do not include an articulation of eros as liberation from relationships of domination and subordination via intimate relationships of shared power. Nor does his articulation of eros explicitly reinstate women’s embodied knowing as important for theo-ethics. It also does little to destabilize gender binaries and hierarchies of identity. Second, Kraus, Finger, and McClendon’s theological anthropologies lack an account of original sin as injustice. Third, they fail to recognize the social political nature of discourses about human bodies. In light of God’s grace, being created in the image of God means humans are created to seek justice in embodied, social, political, sexual relationships.

Drawing on theological anthropologies that pay particular attention to bodies suffering unjustly (e.g., women’s bodies suffering sexual abuse) and understand power as inherent to human relationships (Copeland, Legge, and Douglas), a Mennonite approach to theological anthropology must work to develop its account of sin and grace as that which incorporates an understanding of sin as injustice, maintains a close relationship between physical bodies and the social body, privileges the experiences of bodies that suffer unjustly, destabilizes hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality, and incorporates justice as mutual relation a criterion for the

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\(^{431}\) Ibid.
loving relationships that demonstrate what it means to be created as sexual beings in the image of God.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that an embodied view of the incarnation and a feminist theological anthropology that destabilizes hierarchical binary identities and includes an understanding of sin as injustice ought to be authoritative for a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. An embodied view of the incarnation is consistent with the Mennonite emphasis on discipleship and the normativity of Jesus for faith and life. It has significant implications for an embodied sexual ethics. Jesus’ embodied relationships of shared power model liberating eros as a theo-ethical norm for social/sexual ethics. The Spirit’s presence in Jesus’ earthly body reflects its presence in each person’s physical body (i.e. in “them” as a whole – mind and body) and translates into sexual ethics via the intimate, loving, relationships of shared power that Jesus participated in in embodied ways. A feminist theological anthropology advances the preliminary work of male Mennonite theologians by recognizing the political nature of discourses about the physical body and the corporate/ecclesial body, as well as bodies (including the ecclesial body) as sites of systemic power and control. An account of sin as injustice is a necessary part of this theological anthropology. Such an account is rooted in scripture and attests to what it means to be created in the image of God namely, that humans are created to seek justice – right relations – embodied, social, political, sexual relationships. This necessarily means attending to the particular experiences of bodies that suffer unjustly – including within the church. In the next chapter I continue this work to construct a feminist Mennonite framework for sexual ethics with a vision of discipleship as “erotic peacemaking.”
Chapter 4: Discipleship as Erotic Peacemaking: A Framework for Sexual Ethics

In this final chapter, I present a framework for a theological sexual ethic that incorporates the method, sources, and norms discussed in previous chapters. This sexual ethics values: 1) embodied human experiences of unjust suffering as the starting point for theoethical reflection (reading sources of scripture, tradition, and reason using the norms of justice, just-peace, the well-being of women, liberation and reconciliation, love, and inclusive, egalitarian Christ-centred community); 2) a theory of intersectional power in relation and an understanding of God’s love as the power of mutual relation; 3) the difference that confession of Jesus as Lord makes for persons living as embodied/sexual beings and the church living as an erotic community; 4) the Spirit’s presence in human beings as “embodied spirits” and “inspirited bodies”; 5) an understanding of sin as injustice; 6) a complicated yet intrinsic relationship between the physical body and the social body; and 7) destabilizing hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

Having presented this framework, I summarize my thesis, consider its theoethical implications, and indicate areas for future research that stem from this project.

Sexuality: A Theological Issue for Discipleship

The framework for sexual ethics I offer incorporates a definition of sexuality that is broad in scope. It will not suffice to understand sexuality merely as genital intercourse or as that which is relegated to private exchanges. I appreciate James Nelson’s definition of sexuality:

Sexuality is a sign, a symbol, a means of our call to communication and communion. This is the most apparent in regard to other human beings, and other
body-selves. The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out and embrace others both physically and spiritually... [Sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion – human and divine.\(^{432}\)

Nelson’s definition emphasizes the importance of relationality, embodiment, and the connection between sexuality and spirituality which, as I have argued, are integral for a theological ethics that is nonviolent and good news for all.

How sexuality is a theological issue for discipleship requires additional explanation. Sexuality is a theological issue for Christians in part because it is an inherent yet complicated aspect of the God’s good creation. Human beings are created as embodied beings who are sexual and are called to be in relationship with the creator, self, one another, and creation. A desire for intimacy characterizes these relationships. Sexuality also plays an important role in the mission of the church because how we relate is a means of imaging God to others particularly as disciples of Jesus, who was, himself a particular embodied man who loved and was loved. In addition, how believers view themselves and their sexual identity is reflective of how they experience and are socially conditioned to understand themselves as “body-selves” – people who have no choice but to experience the world through their bodies.\(^{433}\) Sexuality is an integral part of human experience and integrally linked to theology and ethics. It is thus misguided and detrimental to focus on the morality of physical acts apart from or over and against the gospel values of justice, love and peace expressed in relationships of mutuality. The moral issue is what virtues, values, and norms guide believers’ embodied and sexual relationships?

It is common for people to desexualize the elderly and those living with disability in particular. Age and physical or mental disabilities do not take away a person’s embodied existence and thus do not remove a person’s sexuality. As Anne Krabill Hershberger and Willard Krabill articulate in *Sexuality God’s Gift*, “It is false to assume that [seniors] have no sexual feelings, no sexual needs, and no need for affection.”\(^{434}\) With respect to disabled people,

\(^{433}\) Ibid., 20.
Elizabeth Stuart writes: “sexuality is an essential part of personhood”\textsuperscript{435} and “the giving and receiving of love through the exchange of physical pleasure is not dependent upon penetrative intercourse or indeed genital contact.”\textsuperscript{436} As a result, “the body of Christ should promote a more diffuse understanding of sexual activity in which the possibilities for the Christian virtues of patience, equality, mutuality, passion, and hospitality can be practiced more fully than may be allowed by an exclusively penetrative model of sexual activity.”\textsuperscript{437} It is thus of the utmost importance that the Church affirm an understanding of sexuality as encompassing a much broader understanding of who people are as body-selves. The primary purpose of sexuality is relational, rather than procreational since humans continue to be sexual beings even if they are not engaging in sexual intercourse or are not able to conceive and bear children. Therefore, 

\begin{quote}
[f]aithfulness to the gracious God who has created us for wholeness requires that we affirm...the possibility of securing sexual justice for older adults, of transforming relationships, of reclaiming God’s gift of eros for persons of all ages [and abilities]. As sexual beings, we require and reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. As Christians, we seek to make such embrace possible for all persons by securing right relatedness and the concrete well-being of individuals and communities.\textsuperscript{438}
\end{quote}

Sexuality is a theological issue in that God created humans as sexual beings to live in intimate relationships and communion with one another in accordance with a life of discipleship modelled after Christ and calls for an ethics to govern all of our relationships.

The particular theological significance of sexual intercourse for discipleship is difficult to articulate. The most common or traditional understanding of the theological purpose of sexual intercourse is to fulfill God’s commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). The purpose of sexual intercourse is thus intertwined with the purpose of marriage to procreate and pass on God’s laws (according to the Old Testament), or the gospel message of Christ (according to the New Testament), to one’s children.\textsuperscript{439} Article 19 of the \textit{Confession of Faith in a Mennonite}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{436} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{437} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{439} For Scripture passages about raising up a child in the way of the Lord see Proverbs 22:6, Ephesians 6:4, Deuteronomy 4:9,11:19.
\end{footnotes}
Perspective, entitled, “Family, Singleness, and Marriage,” articulates the purposes of marriage and sexual intercourse according to Mennonite Church Canada. It states:

- God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.
- Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship. Marriage is meant for sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children.  

This statement makes a connection between sexual intercourse, marriage, and procreation. While procreation is no longer recognized as the primary purpose of marriage (or sexual intercourse) by most Christians, the theological mandate of sexual intercourse remains intertwined with that of the marriage relationship. This can be problematic for a variety of reasons. First, because marriage is not a viable or preferable option for some people including some seniors, adolescents, and LGBTQ persons who wish to get married in the Mennonite church, for example, but who are not welcome or able to do so in their particular congregation or conference. The only ethical option afforded these people by the Church is to remain single and celibate. However, as Gabrielle Brown reminds us, celibacy is a conscious decision “to give up something good for something that you think will be even better.” In other words, it is a “conscious choice made on behalf of one’s greater personal gain.” Thus, celibacy is not the same as singleness. It is a serious commitment that must be chosen by the individual; it cannot be imposed. What then would a sexual ethic for unmarried people look like? Is it possible for sexual intercourse to have a theological purpose outside of marriage?

A second problem with a sexual ethics that merely measures the goodness/morality of sexual intercourse by whether or not it is committed within a marriage is that it denies the fact that not all marital sex encompasses the values of the gospel (justice, love, compassion, liberation, relationality, and community). As Ellison articulates:

A mature Christian ethic does not restrict sexual activity to marriage alone. Nor does it bless all sex within marriage as morally acceptable. Widespread patterns

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441 Margaret Farley notes that even many Catholic thinkers consider procreation as a necessary justification for any sexual behaviour to be problematic (Just Love, 181).
443 Ibid.
of coercive sex within marriage, including marital rape, are sufficient reason for discarding highly romanticized notions about the sanctity of the marriage bed. Only those sexual relations, marital and non-marital, that exhibit mutual respect and genuine care for the partners should be celebrated by the wider community. Ellison describes the kind of sexual ethics that I am proposing, namely an ethics focused on the quality and character of sexual relationships rather than an ethic of marriage. Focusing on the character of sexual relationships, as measured by the values of justice, just-peace, the well-being of women, liberation and reconciliation, just-love, and Christ-centred community, increases levels of accountability around sexual intercourse as that which ought to be nonviolent and exist within relationships of shared power. Again, the focus is on the moral quality of the relationship as opposed to the marital status or gender and sexual identities of the sexual partners, for example. As Ellison explains:

A justice hermeneutic...allows us to see that the moral problem does not lie in nonconformity to patriarchal norms of sexuality. Rather, the problem of sexuality is reflected in our society in the large numbers of loveless, graceless relationships of all kinds, heterosexual and homosexual, marital and non-marital, and in the splitting off of eroticism from mutuality. The crisis is grounded in the widespread devaluing of women, of gay/lesbian/bisexual people, and of persons in nondominant racial/ethnic communities.

The morality of sexual intercourse and its theological purpose is not located in the institution of marriage per se but within marriages that embody the discipleship values of just-love, peace, and mutuality, and thus reflect the wider mission of the church to image God to others. Furthermore, as indicated in Chapter 2, an understanding of the wider mission of the church and an emphasis on the character of the Christian community must be coupled with an analysis of operations of power in relation. In other words, sexuality must be understood as a theo-ethical issue rooted in lived-world experience of various moral agents whose subjectivities are situated and negotiated in shifting intersections of social power.


Public and Private

An understanding of sexual justice and social justice as integrally related is central to a sexual ethic rooted in peace and justice. Sexuality and sexual ethics should not be understood as that which belongs solely to the private sphere, but as interrelated to both private and public, personal and social, spheres. Beverly Harrison explains why:

Without a better grasp of the intimate connection between personal and social well-being, our sexual ethic will simply reinforce a growing trend toward privatism and the churches’ withdrawal from social engagement. But equally problematic would be any renewed concern for social justice that is devoid of awareness of how our social passivity is rooted in the dynamics of our interpersonal, primary relationships. Social justice and sexual justice are integrally linked.447

Acknowledging the relationship between sexual justice and social justice means addressing and seeking changes to unjust social policies.448 Because particular people such as those who experience economic marginality and social vulnerability, for example, children, older people, women and gay men, and non-skilled, mostly non-white, men,449 are more likely to experience sexual oppression and/or be treated as nonpersons sexually, the task of the community of faith is to address these injustices as questions of social policy also in relation to sexuality with an eye for justice.450

In conjunction with Harrison and other radical Christian justice and peace ethics I claim that a liberative nonviolent theological sexual ethics must consider the connections between sexuality and economic/political structures. As indicated in Chapter 1, in an attempt to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world Mennonites have traditionally been heavily involved in social justice work, most prominently through volunteering and contributing financially to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS). Yet, they lack a fuller understanding of how social justice and sexual justice are integrally linked. A sexual ethics committed to nonviolence affirms this interrelatedness – reflecting an emphasis on justice and

448 Ibid., 280.
449 Ibid., 287.
450 Ibid.
liberation in the logic of its nonviolent ethics and calling confessing believers to embody these norms with regard to sexuality in the ecclesia, the political economic order, and in relation to the rest of creation.\footnote{451} The concerns in these public arenas impact people’s experiences as sexual beings and “no sexual ethic will be adequate unless it incorporates a full appreciation of the interstructuring of social oppression.”\footnote{452}

Justice and Love

The biblical understanding of justice and the command to love God, oneself, neighbour, and all creation, are arguably two of the most important things that should inform understandings of sexuality and how believers are called to live as sexual beings in right relationships. Justice (or righteousness) is a central concept throughout the Bible. The Hebrew word for justice (mishpat), implies: “impartial arbitration, equitable treatment, or adherence to an ideal of what is right.”\footnote{453} In addition to these meanings, “the biblical nuances of justice focus on the highest values of a right relationship with God and to others.”\footnote{454} In the Prophets and the Psalms justice refers to ideology about humanitarian social relationships, for example. Here justice is a “socioethical norm that is used to discuss and critique the interaction between different social groups in the biblical communities.”\footnote{455} Morality and socioeconomic relationships highlighting a concern for the socially weak, oppressed, or marginalized, frequently cited as the widow, stranger, and orphan, are a major concern in the Old Testament. While the prophets understood oppression as “the extraction of goods and services from a vulnerable individual or social subgroup by a more powerful person or politico-economic subgroup,” economic justice is not the only kind of biblical justice.\footnote{456} Rather, “[t]he call for justice in the prophets and the psalms is a call for a condition where categories of people have options available to them through which they can alter significantly their circumstances” from oppression to liberation.\footnote{457}

\footnote{451} Harrison, “Challenging Sexual Ethics,” 70.  
\footnote{452} Harrison, “Sexuality and Social Policy,” 283.  
\footnote{454} Ibid.  
\footnote{455} Ibid., 477.  
\footnote{456} Ibid.  
\footnote{457} Ibid.
In the New Testament, justice is understood as righteousness (dikaiosynē). Here it takes on the meaning of the love command, rather than justice, to refer to complete virtue.\footnote{Pheme Perkins, “Justice, NT,” The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 3, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 475.} It also encompasses notions of distributive justice, the fair distribution of social goods among members of the community, and overthrows social claims to honour, status, and wealth with respect to being disciples of Jesus.\footnote{Ibid., 476.} In this way, God’s justice differs from societal notions of justice for, “[i]nsofar as Christ identifies with the poor, the suffering, the prisoner, actions on their behalf become the standard of justice by which God judges humanity (Mt 25:31-46).”\footnote{Ibid., 476.} Thus, even though the Bible does not clearly articulate the relationship between justice or righteousness and human sexuality for contemporary society, when using biblical understandings of justice as a guide, scripture remains an important and relevant source for discerning how to live moral lives as sexual beings. By translating considered notions of justice into the area of sexuality and sexual relations, “we are able to move sexuality more completely from the realm of the pre-ethical (the realm of taboos) to the ethical.”\footnote{Farley, Just Love, 177.}

A theological, justice and peace-centred approach to sexual ethics will re-examine biblical notions of justice and peace in light of the experiences of those who are oppressed, marginalized, and excluded in the church and/or society and work toward a moral vision of just-sex and relationships of just-love (i.e. relationships of mutuality and nonviolence). In order to do so, a justice and peace-oriented sexual ethic will be conscious of those persons and communities who are more susceptible to sexual exploitation and socio-economic vulnerability, such as the poor, the elderly, the disabled, LGBTQ, and the young. Working toward a moral vision of just-sex and just-love requires an articulation of appropriate vulnerability and just relations of power for sexual relationships. Lebacqz claims that appropriate vulnerability means sexual partners demonstrate equal vulnerability with each other. An example in which appropriate vulnerability is violated is rape - “not only because it violates the vulnerability of the one raped, but also because the rapist guards his own power and refuses to be vulnerable.”\footnote{Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability,” 275.} Farley names criteria for appropriate relationships of power in intimate relationships. She claims: “love is false or
mistaken when it does not accord with the nature of the relationship between the lover and loved.” Loving people appropriately (i.e., justly) means acknowledging that different relationships exhibit varied power differentials, and that those varied power differentials in conjunction with the level(s) of vulnerability exhibited by parties in the relationship play an important role in discerning whether or not a relationship is just and nonviolent. If there is an unequal relationship of power and therefore unequal vulnerability, the relationship is less likely to embody a discipleship ethic rooted in biblical understandings of justice, peace, and love which include shared power and mutuality.

Criteria for just-sex are also named by Marvin Ellison and important for a theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality that is peace-oriented and committed to the well-being of those typically excluded within the ecclesia. Ellison is committed to an understanding of sexual justice within an understanding of “justice-love” as “mutual respect and care and a fair sharing of power.” According to Ellison, an ethical framework for sexual justice includes: “an affirmation of the goodness of sexuality and embodiment, a genuine honoring of sexual difference and respect for sexual minorities, and a willingness to attend to both the personal and political dimensions of sexual injustice and oppression.” Ellison grounds this framework in six core values including, for example, the value of mutual respect and consent, and a willingness to explore the justice implications of sexuality for persons and their communities.

There are several implications of justice-love and sexual justice for a Christian theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality. For example, Ellison argues that such an ethics requires that marriage should be decentred, since it is not the exclusive mode of human intimacy. Furthermore, “sex should also be decentred as the defining criterion for partnerships, marriage, and families of any sort” since it is not the only or necessarily best way “to establish networks of care and intimacy.” Additionally, “mutual pleasure should be seen as a morally worthy pursuit within intimate relationships. The guiding moral interest should no longer be to discourage sex

463 Farley, *Just Love*, 201.
465 Ibid.
466 Ibid.
467 Ibid., 143.
468 Ibid.
or even to promote marriage, but rather to equip people with the skills and insight they will need to assess and improve the quality of their intimate (and other) relationships.”

I affirm many of Ellison’s criteria for sexual justice for my understanding of “just-sex” as a norm for Christian ethics. Ellison’s criteria are rooted in biblical understandings of justice as mutuality and respect and discern what it means to live the commandment to “[l]ove the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31) with regard to sexual relationships. As noted earlier in this chapter, this is also something Farley does in her articulation of just-love as a norm for sexual ethics. Farley describes the need for mutuality and respect, which are characteristics of just-love, in terms of “a concrete reality of the beloved.” Specifically, she states that “love is true and just, in the sense of ‘accurate,’ (1) when it does not falsify or ‘miss’ the reality of the person loved (either as human or as unique individual), (2) when it does not falsify or ‘miss’ the reality of the one loving.” Sexual behaviour that meets these criteria, as well as those named by Ellison (e.g. affirm the goodness of sexuality, honour sexual difference, and attend to the personal and political dimensions of sexual injustice and oppression) embodies the command to live and love in right relationships with ourselves and each other, and there to meet God. Ellison would call these relationships of “justice-love.” “Justice-love” (Ellison) or “just-love” (Farley) is a necessary component of a Christian sexual ethics.

I want to reiterate that Ellison’s critique of marriage as a norm for sexual ethics is coupled with an emphasis on justice-love. Therefore, he does not dismiss Christian marriage as unimportant for sexual ethics, but rather, provides a norm to guide it in life giving ways. It is true what Ellison claims namely that marriage has, in large part, functioned as a norm for Christian sexual ethics that weighs too heavily. Marriage, more than just-love as shared power and mutuality (which is nonviolent) is often the deciding factor for whether or not sexual activity is moral – making spousal abuse difficult to name and, therefore, easy to condone. As a result, marriage itself should not function as a norm for sexual ethics. That said, marriage remains

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469 Ibid.
470 Ibid., 202.
integral as a covenant before God in the context of the church measured by the key norm of just-love.

Erotic Peacemaking

An articulation of discipleship as “erotic peacemaking” is a defining feature of the sexual ethics I frame in this thesis. Competing claims in our society and in our churches about what constitutes “violence” – with the eroticization or denial of some forms of violence (e.g. sexual violence) as a result of masculinist and heteronormative pacifism, continue to cause unjust suffering among women and LGBTQ Mennonites. Feminists thus insist on broadening primarily male definitions of violence as war and state violence to include systemic oppressions and internal forms of violence “that destroy a person’s sense of wholeness.”471 Attending to the experiences of women who have experienced violence, Penner among others expands the definition of violence as an aggressive or physically violent act to include physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and spiritual violations which “are all means that are used to gain control.”472 Therefore, re-claiming the erotic for Mennonite peace theology means resisting all violence in every relationship by working in concrete/material ways for right relationships of mutuality and by supporting each other in “finding the positive power of our own being as sexual persons.”473 Reclaiming the erotic as such increases Mennonite peace theology’s potential to be a valued partner in conversations about peace and justice related to gendered, racialized, and sexualized violence. It also improves Mennonite efforts to end the violence of war since all forms of violence are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. A Christian commitment to peace is not a commitment to peace in some relationships and not others. It is a commitment to peace in all relationships and peace as the inherent worth of each person – including their sexuality.

The challenge for peacemakers is to deconstruct the eroticisation of violence against certain bodies and in its place to build an understanding of the erotic as believed and embodied desire for justice and peace, which is love in action. The eroticisation of violence is the

472 Penner, *Healing Waters*, 16.
eroticisation of power as domination. When power as domination is eroticised, power can only be experienced by dominating another and a person can only share or give away their power through submission to another’s control. And as Mary Hobgood articulates, “[t]ragically, a culture that supports dominant and subordinate relationships and the repression of sexual desire will suffer enormous amounts of violent sex.” Rape is a clear example of what the eroticisation of dominating power leads to as rape is an expression of power through control and dominance (and violence). Erotic peacemaking, on the other hand, elicits desire for relationships of shared power and cultivates each person’s positive power as a sexual being and “engage[s] critical consciousness about the way gender, sex, and race privilege have not only fundamentally structured war making, but will be embedded in creative attempts to reframe peacemaking in Western culture.”

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, a missing component of Mennonite/witness ecclesiology is an understanding of embodied, erotic power as relational and a theology of shared power. A related concern is the need for discipleship ethics to reclaim the erotic as a positive source of power. In Re-creating the Church: Communities of Eros, Pamela Dickey Young considers what it means to be ecclesial communities of eros. Her guiding question is: “What if we begin to think of churches as communities of eros (that is, communities where love entailed connection and passion) rather than communities of agape (that is, communities where love is said to be all giving and no receiving, allowing for no real connections)?” In answering this question Young connects power, relationality, and sexuality locating particular understandings of them within the relationality of Christ, who loves and is loved in return, who desires intimacy, and who shares power. If Christ is relational in this way, then the church is also called to embody this kind of relationality, which in turn means that churches are inherently about sexuality, desire, intimacy, and shared power.

474 See Thistlethwaite, “The Erotic Fictions of the War on Women,” Women’s Bodies as Battlefield, 103-125.
476 Thistlethwaite, Women’s Bodies as Battlefield, 172.
477 Pamela Dickey Young, Re-creating the Church, 1.
478 Ibid., 32.
479 Ibid., 3.
An understanding of Christ’s love as relational is a helpful corrective to an over emphasis on love as selflessness (linked to agape) within Mennonite theology. Mennonite theologies of suffering and servanthood, for example, have had and continue to have dangerous implications and consequences for healthy sexual ethics. In their inability to adequately address the complex realities of unequal relationships of power and their impacts on sexuality and gender, these theologies inadvertently support abusive sexual relationships. A limited view of sexuality as sexual intercourse, as well as sex-negativity and fear of certain bodies (e.g. those with disabilities, LGBTQ, and women) within the tradition and its theology exacerbate the problem. Young seeks to correct an overemphasis on self-sacrificial love stating: “not all love that is mutually enriching is by definition merely egotistical or self-serving, and not all love that regards the other and the other’s need with utmost seriousness requires us to evacuate the self.” She expands: “The admonition in ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Lk 6:31) is not to give away the self, but to regard the other as the self.”

Embodiment and relationality are keys to discipleship. Yet, in confusing eros with lust and emphasizing an understanding of agape as self-sacrificial love, embodiment and relationality are overlooked and even disregarded. Eros reimagined as true mutuality in relationship encompassing sexual love, but also desire in other intimate relationships, including with creation, and “as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” calls believers to “pay serious attention to the embodied self and its needs and desires.” In turn, an emphasis on the embodied self and eros as mutual relationship necessarily means willing and acting into being the good of self and other together. Eros, then, actually resists individualism in such a way that does not denigrate the self. It also encourages intimate sometimes sexual relationships of mutuality rather than domination and subordination.

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480 Ibid., 33.
481 Ibid.
482 Ibid.
484 Pamela Dickey Young, Re-creating the Church, 34-35.
485 Ibid., 35.
These erotic relationships are political in nature and compatible with Mennonite ecclesiologies. Young explains: “Relational Christology does not rob Christology of its political implications; indeed, it recognizes the power of relationship to God through Jesus to evoke change. A Christology of relation challenges patriarchy and kyriarchy while still acknowledging the centrality of Jesus to ongoing Christian tradition.”

A view of eros as rooted in the relationality of Christ and political in nature resonates with Anabaptist/Mennonite notions of discipleship and ecclesiology as political. The difference is that liberating eros, as defined by theologians such as Ellison and Young, pays attention to the political nature of intimate, embodied, and sexual relationships. Young’s work, unlike the work of Huebner and Yoder and Hauerwas, also succeeds in connecting individual and communal, as well as personal, ecclesial and social well-being as integral to discipleship.

In sum, liberating eros informs an ecclesiology for Christian sexual ethics rooted in the example of Christ and that is liberative for all. Jesus’ continued presence in the church as his body – the body of Christ – need not, and must not, remain abstract from the particular embodied experiences of believers nor from a vision of the church as erotic. Like Young, I believe it is within the church’s mission, including the Mennonite church’s mission, “to continue the work of eros, of intimate relationship both within its walls and beyond its own boundaries, to encompass the universe” and, therefore, to reject articulations of ecclesiology as ethics that stand in the way of doing so.

Conclusions

In this chapter I brought the findings of previous chapters together to shape an adequate theological framework for sexual ethics with a moral vision of discipleship as “erotic peacemaking.” I have argued that this framework draws on a broad definition of sexuality that incorporates the human desire/blessed need for intimate and embodied relationships in communion with others as desired by God who came in Jesus, born of Mary in Galilee, to show the Way of abundant life for all and God’s good creation. I have emphasized the ethical

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486 Ibid., 52.
487 Ibid., 148.
substance of relationships rather than the morality of sexual acts per se. In the process I have upheld biblical notions of justice as relationships of shared power and mutuality as normative for sexual ethics. I also incorporated an understanding of sexuality as a public and private issue and positioned it within the mission of the church.
Conclusion

The purpose of this project has been to explore key sources in Mennonite social and sexual ethics using liberative feminist sources and norms in order to determine the potential of Mennonite peace theology, ecclesiology, and Christ-centeredness for a feminist Mennonite embodied theological ethic applied to sexuality in particular. In the process I have named the ways in which normative, predominantly heterosexual male, contributions to Mennonite peace theology and ecclesiology frequently fail to address the reality of internal violence (violence that occurs within the community of faith) including, for example, sexualized and gendered violence foregrounded by the Yoder cases where Mennonite women and LGBTQ persons’ experiences were a testament. Their stories of abuse, exclusion, and marginalization within the Mennonite church at both congregational and conference levels (MC USA and MC Canada) signal inadequacies in Mennonite theo-ethics and as well as the lived practice of these ethics. I have highlighted the following inadequacies in Mennonite theo-ethics: an underdeveloped theory of power operating through systems and structures and a theology of power as shared/mutuality; an overemphasis on state violence compared to violence within the church and forms of violence typically relegated to the personal or private (e.g. sexual, psychological, and spiritual violence); its failure to acknowledge sexuality as a public and personal issue; a limited understanding of sexuality as that which pertains to sexual acts and genitalia as compared to relations of people are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion – human and divine; and an account of sin that incorporates injustice. I have highlighted the following gaps between Mennonite theory and practice, between the ideal and the real: an overemphasis on scripture in Mennonite discourses on sexuality as that which is incongruent with Anabaptist/Mennonite theology’s emphasis on the role of the hermeneutic community as an interpretive body; inattention to embodiment and physicality for ethics, which is incongruent with the Anabaptist/Mennonite understanding of discipleship as that which entails both an inner and outer change and results in a lived ethic as a response to the Gospel; and ecclesial discernment processes that support the status quo rather than a commitment to peace with justice.

To move towards ecclesial integrity and an adequate, embodied, non-violent sexual ethics, I have argued that Mennonite theological ethics must include: a commitment to the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed by reigning power relations as the starting point for Christian sexual ethics; an embodied view of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth; a peace ethic that incorporates an understanding of justice especially based in a theory of how power works to dominate and subordinate despite good intentions; critical attention to the role and relationship of sexuality and discursive power within the public and private spheres; and a theological anthropology that accounts for sin and affirms human sexuality as graceful in loving, erotic relationships modelled on justice (right relationships of shared power). Incorporating these methodological and theological commitments reframes the emphases on scripture, hermeneutic community, discipleship, and peace within Mennonite theology to function in life-giving, embodied, and liberating ways for a constructive embodied and sexual ethics.

The most significant contribution this study has made is to develop and use a liberative feminist peace and justice oriented framework for a theo-ethics of embodiment and sexuality informed by revised aspects of Mennonite theology’s emphasis on peace and ecclesiology. In particular, I have argued that the Mennonite understanding of ecclesiology as ethics requires moral norms and practices of accountability to those persons and groups most harmed by disordered relations of power in order to be ethical. A liberative feminist Mennonite framework furthers scholarly theo-ethical contributions from Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives by offering a vital corrective to the Yoderian and Hauerwasian streams of Christian ethics. It is also a contribution to the field of Christian sexual ethics more broadly as an ethics that names causes of, and makes the case for developing and implementing policies to resist, destructive social patterns in the community of faith. This thesis critically imagines how peace theology, discipleship, body theology, and sexual ethics are intertwined using particular norms for “erotic peacemaking,” including mutuality and liberation for all.

Future work stemming from this project will continue to develop a framework of “erotic peacemaking” for sexual ethics. Further analytic work needs to be done to deepen the implications of what normative mutuality and erotic peace-seeking mean in specific contexts. To this end, the implications of a feminist Mennonite theo-ethics will discern how intersecting
systems and structures of power shape all relations and thus impact discipleship ethics. In particular, further work will interpret more clearly what constitutes violence and the collective and passive bystanding to violence. This work will continue to endeavor how to better live as moral agents of erotic peacemaking as disciples of Jesus Christ.
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